

The Woman and the Snake

Translation of “Nari o Nagini” by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay

Translated by
Soumya Mohan Ghosh
Research Scholar
Indian School of Mines, India

Abstract

The story, “The woman and the Snake”, originally titled “Nari o Nagini”, explores the intricacies of man-woman relationships and explicates the psychology of the woman mind, especially the interplay of the twin emotions of love and jealousy. The present translation of the short story by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, one of the foremost short story writers of Bengali literature, is an attempt to present the complexity of text to the global readers. Special care has been taken to retain the original flavour of the source language text by following a judicious blending of metaphor, or word for word translation, and paraphrase, or sense for sense translation, methods.

Keywords:

The Woman and the Snake, Nari o Nagini, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, man-woman relationships

Khoda¹ Sekh was collecting bricks from the brick-kiln. Nobody knew what Khoda Sekh's name was; even Khoda himself might not remember it. He was called Khoda since he had broken his left leg in his youth. Not only he was lame, his nose got stuck in an ugly

disease because of some abominable habit in his youth, only a horrible cavity can be seen there. Then, he got affected with pox, ugly Khoda became more horrible in appearance with that mark of pox.

Khoda was collecting bricks in his own mind.

Adai alias Wahed Sekh was coming in a bullock cart nearby. He began singing twisting the tails of the two bullocks— an obscene song. However, suddenly his endeavour got spoiled. The cows abruptly came to a halt. Adai, being shaken, stopped singing and said in exasperation— bastard cow, haven't said anything—

He raised the truncheon in great anger, to punish them for their disobedience. The cows were also continuously growling in a profuse manner. But Adai couldn't strike, he shouted— Khoda, Khoda, snake— snake!

A young snake was dangling slightly raising its hood in front of Adai's cart. Jumping from the cart, Adai lifted a piece of brick from the ground.

Khoda was limping while running, he pleaded— don't hurt it Adai, don't hurt. Coming, I'm coming.

The piece of brick in Adai's hand remained as it was, he exclaimed— what a beautiful snake by god! Face is bright red like sindoor². Even how gorgeous is its hood! But it's fleeing— fleeing, come fast.

The serpent was fleeing quickly this time. But it was going in the direction of Khoda, its aim was to flee from Adai putting him behind. It didn't notice Khoda.

Khoda shouted— hey Adai, throw your truncheon to me. Shit, it went into the kiln. It's Udaynag man, it's very hard to get. I'd have earned something if it were caught.

Khoda was a snake-charmer. Besides being a charmer, he also showed feats with snakes. He had set up big covered urn-shaped pots in the back of the thatch. He imprisoned them in these pots. When they became impoverished he released them in a far off field. So many even died also. Khoda didn't work as a labourer when he got snakes. At that time he was seen going to show feats with an odd drum and a snake-charmer's flute. Even the income was not bad. But his budget of ganja³-opium got increased then. Sometimes he drank wine also. As a result, after the snakes got over, he again went out with his basket and bundle. Putting forward his horrible face into the entrance of affluent domestic households he asked— will you employ labour— labour?

He smiled after flattering, his horrible face became more horrible and terrific; he

worked hard if he got wages, he didn't deceive there. When he couldn't get any labour, he started begging taking his basket in his shoulders. Whatever he got, he spent in buying ganja-opium. If something got left after buying, he returned home drinking some spirituous liquor and began to cry holding Jobeda Bibi⁴'s legs, said, there's no limit of your misery falling in my hands. I've killed you without giving you food.

Jobeda used to pass her hands lightly on her husband's head and said, laughing — come on, come on, don't be insane, let me go— let me look for some rice.

Khoda's began to cry even more loudly, now embracing Jobeda's neck he said— I couldn't even give you a pair of new saree⁵. You've to wear old ragged pieces every day.

Anyway put aside all these. The next day he came to the kiln very early in the morning. He had a small stick in his hand and a basket in his armpit. Crimson glow started appearing just then on the east horizon in front of him. Birds were warbling continuously seating at the heart of the trees. In some Hindu temples of the village conch and bell of mangalarati⁶ were ringing. Khoda, seating over a high hillock, was inspecting the place with a sharp watchful eye.

The crimson colour of the eastern sky was gradually thickening and expanding in periphery. The bricks in the kiln were getting more reddish in that glow. Red stain got even in Khoda's filthy clothes. Khoda stood up.

There— isn't it?

Perhaps that young snake was playing by moving its hood and raising its head towards the eastern sky in the vast expanse of arid land nearby. It was looking like deep red in the crimson glow of morning sun. In that red colour its deep black wheel of the hood was expressed in its exquisite charm. It was delightful just like the spectrum in the colourful feathers of a butterfly. Khoda was absorbed in it. Softly he uttered in his own mind— wao!

He then slowly moved forward. The baby snake was so overwhelmed by the welcoming of the rising sun that its play didn't stop even in the sound of Khoda's footsteps. It turned back, startled, when he came very near. The next moment it stroke roaring. But it couldn't raise its hood anymore. Khoda had already pressed its head with a deft movement of his nimble hand with the stick of his left hand. Holding the tail of the snake in his right hand he shook it a couple of times and said looking at it minutely— female.

Almost six months later. Returning from a ganja shop Khoda told Jobeda— look what have I got.

Jobeda asked while brooming the courtyard— what?

Khoda brought out a small glittering object from a corner of his cloth and held it in his left palm in front of Jobeda. It was a small mini— an ornament for wearing on nose.

Jobeda asked in wonder— what'll you do with such a small mini?

Khoda replied smiling— I'll put it on Bibi.

Jobeda was stunned, Khoda entered the house smiling. Then he went outside embracing a snake in his neck. It was that snake. It had grown up these days. But it had lost that vigour. It was wandering on Khoda's neck and shoulder lifting its head slightly in calm and without any grudge.

Jobeda told— see, don't do that. Though it doesn't have the vigour, they are not to be trusted.

Khoda replied smiling— their poison-fangs are not to be trusted. Otherwise, they also love Jobeda. It doesn't have poison-fangs, but it has other tooth, why it never bites me. See how nicely my Bibi's coming like a good girl! —Saying this he kissed its mouth pressing its two lips together.

Jobeda wasn't surprised, it was nothing new to her. However, she scorned him in disgust— chi chi chi?! Don't you've any repugnance? How many times I told you not to do it, you tell me?

Khoda turned a deaf ear to it. He said in exhilaration, see see, how it embraces my arm, just see. You know, when the male and female snakes play, they embrace each other just like that. Have you seen it ever? Ah:, how delightful a game, by god!

Jobeda replied— I don't have to see, you've seen that's good. But I understand that it'll end your play.

Khoda was piercing Bibi's nose with a needle at that moment. He pressed its tail

with his toe and face with his left hand. He left the snake putting the mini on piercing its nose by a needle held in his right hand. Bibi started striking Khoda repeatedly roaring in pain and anger. He told while blocking those by the cover of the basket holding in front of him like a shield— don't get angry Bibi, don't get angry. See how beautiful you're looking. Give me Jobeda, give me the mirror! Let her see herself!

Jobeda replied— I can't.

—Give me please, I'd fall on your feet, give me for once. I'll see how she reacts seeing her face!

Jobeda couldn't neglect this request of her husband. She went inside to get the mirror.

Khoda implored— bring some sindoor kindly. Jobeda responded from inside— what, for what?

Khoda told laughing in great amusement— you'll see what'll happen. I won't say right now.

Jobeda brought a mirror and some sindoor and put those down some distance away. Holding Bibi tactfully Khoda put a mark of red line on the serpent's head taking some sindoor on the tip of a small chip of wood. Then he said breaking into laughter— I've married her Jobeda, she becomes your sotin⁸.

Later, he told Bibi— see see Bibi, how beautiful you are looking! — Letting the serpent go he held the mirror in front of it.

Then he started singing in a hoarse nasal voice beating the odd drum—

I know not this'll happen—

Krishna will to Mathura
Abandoning Gokul

O I know not—

A few months later.

It was raining heavily in the middle of a rainy season. Khoda went somewhere, couldn't come back because of rain and foul weather. Jobeda felt a kind of smell from the house— the smell was very light, but it was sweet and somewhat odd! She couldn't understand even looking here and there.

Khoda returned a couple of days later, uttering an obscene invective to the water god he said to Jobeda— give me something to eat Jobeda, I'm feeling very hungry.

Jobeda served some rice in a plate inside the house. Washing the mud on his feet Khoda asked entering the house— what's the smell Jobeda?

Jobeda replied— who knows, it's been smelling for a few days.

Khoda didn't speak, he was trying to ascertain the nature of the smell breathing frequently. He stood in front of Bibi's basket moving here and there. The serpent inside the basket roared by the sound of human footsteps.

Khoda proclaimed— yes!

Jobeda asked in earnestness— what’s that you say?

Khoda replied— the scent of Bibi. It’s a female, it’s time has come to meet with male serpent. Male serpent comes by this scent.

Jobeda became astonished. She pondered— who knows dear, your affair is good for you. Come, eat these *panti*⁹ now.

—It has to be set free in the field, Khoda mused while eating. They are not to be kept at this moment.

He finished the sentence heaving a deep sigh.

Jobeda heaving a sigh of relief responded— that’d be good, I can’t tolerate it. So many snakes die, why it doesn’t!

Khoda brought out Bibi from the basket after finishing his meal. He spoke about love holding its face tightly.

Jobeda told— you see, it has not been shaved for a few days, it has developed teeth. So, why this attachment dear? Please go and set it free.

Khoda replied— see see, how she’s embracing my hand, see.

In the afternoon Khoda was seating mournfully. He left Bibi in the adjacent jungle. Jobeda insisted, why are you seating here like this, you tell me? Go and smoke some *ganja* or something!

Khoda mumbled— I’m feeling sad for Bibi.

Jobeda burst out laughing — go to hell. What happens to me hearing your words—

—No Jobeda, I’m feeling very sad.

Jobeda now seating beside her husband caressed him and affectionately embracing his neck said— why dear, don’t you like me?

Khoda kissing her cordially reassured — I live by your strength Jobeda. You’re more precious than my life.

Jobeda suddenly said excitedly— see, see, Bibi has come back. See there— inside the drain.

Truly Bibi was moving raising its hood inside the drainage canal.

Khoda said attempting to get up— wait, I’ll bring her.

Jobeda responded holding her husband firmly— no.

Then she said in a hoarse voice, go away, gee, gee.

She threw a dung cake at it by her left hand. The serpent slowly went away from the canal after repeated furious striking on the ground.

It was probably midnight then, suddenly Jobeda screamed— get up get up, something had bitten me!

Getting up quickly Khoda saw lighting a lamp, indeed a drop of blood was

tumbling like a drop of water in Jobeda's left toe.

Jobeda shouted again— Bibi— your Bibi had bitten me, see.

The serpent was going slowly encircling an urn shaped pot. Khoda quickly got up and putting the snake in the basket threatened— I'll kill you if Jobeda dies.

Jobeda didn't survive. Sign of death started appearing in her body as soon as the sun set. Her hair started falling in a slightest pull. All the quacks left. Khoda remained seated beside her forehead making his horrible face pathetic.

An expert commented— you'd have also died Khoda, you've escaped luckily. They are highly wrathful, probably it came to bite you.

Khoda replied shaking his head looking at his face with tears in his eyes— no.

Khoda had taken the state of fakir. His homestead had become a pile of ruins. Once there was a pathway beside his house, now it was abandoned, nobody took that way. They used to say, there're fear of snakes. They're very dangerous— Udaynag. They were seen playing in the morning at the time of sunrise, red coloured snakes oscillating their hoods.

Khoda couldn't slay Bibi. He set her free. He only told— what's your fault, it's the nature of women. Jobeda couldn't tolerate you either.

GLOSSARY

1. Khoda — lame.
2. Sindoor — vermilion; in Hindu tradition applying sindoor on the forehead of women symbolizes the mark of the married women and ceasing to wear it implies widowhood and wiping of sindoor symbolizes barrenness.
3. Ganja— a hallucinating drug prepared from the dried leaves of hemp.
4. Bibi— literally wife; often used to call somebody (female) affectionately.
5. Saree— traditional Indian cloth for women; worn over petticoat and blouse, however, rural women usually drape it over their body without any accompanied cloth.
6. Mangalarati — the ceremonial waving of lights before an idol at the time of dawn in Hindu tradition.
7. Chi— expression of disgust.
8. Sotin — another wife of one's husband.
9. Panti— rice which is kept in water from the previous night

About Author

Soumya M. Ghosh is a research scholar at Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad. His areas of interest are Feminist theatre, Translation studies, Indian literature, Feminist studies and Postcolonial literature. He has done his Post graduation from Pondicherry University and qualified UGC-NET in December 2012. His email id. is soumya.rkmv@gmail.com.