

Translation

“The Judge” by Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by
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First Episode

After the change of numerous dwellings when the only man who had given the middle-aged Khiroda a refuge also left her like tattered raiment, the prospect of searching for another shelter just for mere sustenance filled her with hoots of disapproval.

Just like the season of autumn, at the end of youth comes a profound, tranquil, and beautiful time when the fruits and grains of life are matured and ripened. The unrestrained gaieties of spring seem unsuited at the time.

By this time we have almost completed setting up our households in the world; numerous good and bad incidents, various joys and pains, having assimilated into our lives have matured the person housing inside us, the wicked illusionary land of imagination beyond our reach is retracted off all the confused wishes and instilled with our own humble capabilities within the bounds of the household; at this time the fascinating look of new love is not attractive anymore, but people become more endeared to old relations. During this time the suppleness of youth is withered drop by drop, the youthful inner nature, however, by way of years of living together, find blatant manifestation in the eyes and countenances; the smile, the look in the eyes, the voice become one with the person dwelling inside of us. Having abandoned the unfulfilled desires, concluded the process of bereavement for the dear departed souls, pardoned those who once made deceitful pretenses -- those who came, those who loved and remained close during the inclemencies, grieves and separations which wrought the domestic life from time to time, we embrace them and create a well-experimented, convincing existence in the midst of such perpetual dear companions of life, and in the process encounter the finale of all endeavors and the fulfillment of all of life's aspirations. At the pleasant evenfall of youth, at such a peaceful juncture of life, a person who has to make a fresh run after the false hopes of new savings, new acquaintances and new relations -- for whose rest the bed has not been prepared yet, for whose homecoming the evening light has not been lit, there is not a more miserable creature in the world than him.

One day at the terminal point of her youth when Khiroda woke up at dawn and found that her lover had absconded the night before with all her wealth and ornaments; she did not even have the savings to pay the rent of her apartment --

Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975-2935), Vol 2, No 4, 2010

Special Issue on Rabindranath Tagore, edited by Amrit Sen

URL of the Issue: <http://rupkatha.com/v2n4.php>

URL of the translation: <http://rupkatha.com/V2/n4/28TagoreBicharakTranslation.pdf>

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she had not the money to even procure milk for her three year old son -- when she thought that in the thirty eight years of her mortal existence, she had failed to make a relation with a single person, did not even have the right to live or die at a corner of a home; when she thought that today, like the other days, she would have to dry her tears and apply eye-salve on her two eyes, would have to embellish her lips and her forehead with the tint of lac, dumfounding the tattered youth with strange beguilements, would have to muster unbounded patience and spread new spells of enchantment and steal new hearts once again with a smiling visage; then she closed the door and rolling on the ground began hitting her head against the hard floor -- starved, she lay in a moribund state the whole day. Dusk eventually arrived. Darkness began coiling in the lamp-less corners of the house. Fortunately, an old lover came, and shouting 'Khiro, Khiro,' began banging on the door. Khiroda abruptly opened the door, and growling like a tigress with a broomstick in her hand, came out running; the amorous young man immediately took the exit route.

The boy had cried his way to sleep in a bout of hunger and lay under the bed; hearing the commotion he woke up, and in the dark began crying 'ma, ma' in a broken voice. Khiroda, pressed the wailing child to her chest with all her might, and running like a lighting bolt, jumped into the adjoining well.

On hearing the noise, the neighbors arrived near the well. In a jiffy Khiroda and the child were taken out of the water. Khiroda lay unconscious, and the child had died. In the hospital Khiroda was restored to health. The magistrate convicting her of murder sent her up to the sessions.

Second Episode

Judge Mohitmohan Dutta, Statutory Civilian. His severe judgment sentenced Khiroda a death by hanging. Considering the wretched circumstances of the ill-fated woman, the lawyers tried their best to save her, but they weren't successful in their efforts. The judge did not consider her worthy of even an iota of sympathy.

There was reason behind his considering Khiroda undeserving of sympathy; on one hand he considered a Hindu woman equivalent to a goddess, while on the other he entertained in his mind a deep distrust for the female species. He believed that women were yearning to sever their familial ties; let the discipline lax and there wouldn't be one good woman within the bounds of the society.

There was reason behind such a conviction too. To understand this reason we need to discuss a part of the history of Mohit's younger days.

When Mohit was a second year college student, he was a completely different person in appearance and in conduct. Now he had a glabrous patch in

the forepart of his head, a tuft of never-cut hair kept on the back of the head, every morning a sharp razor blade now clean up the undergrowth of his of facial hairs; but back then his golden glasses, his beard and mustache and European hairdressing almost made him look like the nineteenth century new edition of Lord Kartika. He was especially tentative to fine dressing, wasn't avert to drinking and meat and, additionally, there were a couple of accompanying symptoms, too.

Not far from his place lived a family. They had a widowed daughter called Hemsashi. She was pretty young; hardly touching fourteen or fifteen years of age.

The emerald green coastline always looks dreamily picturesque from the sea, but not from the shore itself. Behind the concealment of the enclosure of widowhood, she was somewhat distant from domestic life, and due to this estrangement, the domestic life seemed to her as heavenly enticing as the pleasure garden of the world beyond. She had no idea how complicated and iron-hard the contrivances of the mills and workshops of the world were -- intermingled with grief and contentment, fortune and distress, uncertainty, danger, dejection and lamentation. She felt that domestic life was as easy as the slow, sweet warbling sound of a clear, flowing rivulet; the beautiful world in front holds broad and trouble-free thoroughfares; happiness dwelled just outside her window, unappeased desires just inside the incarceration of her soft, afflicted, beating heart. Especially, at the time in the firmament of her heart, a wild youthful storm swelled up and filled the magnificent world with the beautiful fragrance of spring. The entire blue was suffused with the wave of her unrestrained emotion, and around the perfumed core of her heart, the world manifested itself in layers like the soft petals of red lotus.

Her family consisted of her parents and her two younger brothers. Her brothers had their meals early in the morning and left for school, they returned from school and after dinner, around evening, headed for the night school to finish their lessons. Their father earned a meager salary; a home tutor was beyond the budget.

During the leisure time between her domestic activities, Hem sat at the window of her lonely room. She gazed at the people walking up and down the main road; the street peddlers shouted in their loud plaintive voices, she listened to them; and she thought the pedestrians were happy, even the beggars were free, and that the hucksters were making a hard attempt to earn their living, that was not the case either -- they were one of the many actors in the vaudeville stage of human movement.

And, in the morning and in the evenings, she saw the neatly dressed, vainglorious, broad-chested Mohitmohan. Seeing him she thought as if he were good fortune personified, the greatest of all men, and the equivalent of the great Lord Indra. She felt that this dignified, well dressed young man had everything, and that he could be given everything. Just as a little girl vivifies her doll as she

plays with it, the widow embellished him with all the divine exaltedness and casting him in the image of God, began playing with him.

On some evenings she saw Mohit's room brightly lit, the sound of the dancer's anklets, singing female voices resounding in full glory. On those evenings, she stared at the firmly grounded restless shadows with her sleepless, wistful eyes, and spent the whole night sitting awake. Her distressed, pained heart like an engaged bird struck her in the chest with ruthless emotion.

Did she rebuke her imitated God for his indulgence in wanton frolics, or perhaps reproached him? That was not the case. Like fire attracts moths with the temptation of starlight, Mohit's illuminated chamber, mortified with song and instrumental music, pleasure-intoxicated reveling, attracted Hemsashi with a similar kind of heavenly mirage. Sitting awake in the middle of the night, she created an illusory world with the light and shadow and music coming from the casement yonder and her longings and desires, and placing her own mortal-marionette in the enchanting castle, observed with bewilderment and surprise; and in the flames of her life and youth, joy and misery, present and afterlife burning like incense stick, she worshipped him in that silent, lonely temple. She had no idea that inside that pleasure casement yonder, in the rippling currents of merriment, an excessively exhausted, filthy, vicious, abominable hunger and life-erosive was in conflagration. The widow failed to see from afar the heartless cruelty that smiled hypocritically in the wakeful night-faring lights.

Hem could have spent the rest of her life in a state of dreamy entrancement sitting at her lonely window with her illusory heaven and her imaginary deity, but, unfortunately, the divine spirit showed mercy, and paradise drew near her. When heaven finally touched the land of earth, heaven broke into pieces, and the person who sitting forlorn had built it was also reduced to dust.

When Mohit's slaving eyes fell on this entranced young lady, when he received a letter from her written in scared, eager, impure orthography and fantod in response to his own innumerable mails to her written under the sobriquet 'Binodchandra,' and in the days following how the storm raged on in action and reaction, in exultation and diffidence, in suspicion and deference, apprehension and desire, and then, after that, how the entire world revolved around the widow with outrageous cataclysmic ecstasy, and how the reeling world gradually became invisible like unfounded shadows as it whirled around, and finally, how one day, all of a sudden, the woman was speedily thrown out of the spinning universe and fell at a great distance, I do not see the need of recounting those incidents in details.

One day in the dead of night, Hemsashi left her parents, her brothers and her house and sat in a vehicle with Binodchanra-pseudonymed Mohit. When the deified God attached itself next to her with all its clay and straw and tinsel jewelry, she was reduced to the ground in shame and disgust.

At last when the car started, she touched Mohit's feet, crying, and said, "Oh dear, I beseech you, please take me back home." Mohit hurriedly covered her mouth; the vehicle rolled on speedily. Like a soon-to-be-drowning, moribund person recalls distinctly all the life incidents momentarily before death, similarly in the coiling darkness behind the closed doors of the vehicle Hemsashi began remembering how her father wouldn't sit down to supper without her sitting in front of him; she remembered, her youngest brother loved to be fed by her after he had returned from school; she remembered, in the morning she dressed beetle leaves with her mother, and in the evening her mother tied her hair. All the tiny corners of the room and all the minuscule chores of the day began scintillating before her mind. Her solitary life and her tiny household seemed like heaven to her. The beetle leaf dressing, hairstyling, fanning her father while he dined, picking his gray hairs as he took siestas on holidays, enduring the mischievousness of her brothers -- all these seemed to her as peaceful and precious joys of life; she failed to understand despite having it all there was need for any other happiness in life.

She felt that all the family women in all the neighborhoods of the earth were inundated in sound slumber. How comfortable and peaceful was the snooze of night in her own bedroom, in her own bed, why she failed to realize that previously. The household ladies would wake up in the morning, would embark on their daily chores without the slightest hesitation, and for the homeless Hemsashi when the sleepless night would give way to dawn, and in the happy daybreak, when in their little household next to the narrow street the familiar, peaceful and jovial rays of the morning sun would fall what shame would present itself unexpectedly-- what disgrace, what lamentation would awake!

Hem burst into tears; pleading pathetically she said, "The night is not over. My mother, my two brothers are not awake yet; please take me back." But her deity turned a deaf ear, boarding on a rumbling second class vehicle, took her in the direction of her much longed beatific heaven.

Soon after this, God and his heaven boarded, once again, another haggard second class vehicular compartment, and left for a newer destination -- the woman was submerged in neck deep filth.

Third Episode

Only one of the incidents from Mohit's history has been narrated above; lest the storyline turns dreary, I have abstained from mentioning anymore.

Moreover, there is no need to raise those antiquated stories any longer. There hardly existed a mortal in this world who remembered the Binodchandra name. Mohit had become virtuous now; after finishing his daily prayers and the sacrament of offering water to the deities, he always occupied himself in the discussion of sacred texts. He had even engaged his little sons in the practice of

yoga, and keeping the women of the household in a gynaeceum impermeable by the sun, moon and the five elements of nature, wielded great authority over them. One day he had wronged several women, therefore he awarded severe sentences of punishment to all the societal transgressions of women.

A day or two after giving Khiroda a death sentence, the epicurean Mohit went to the prison garden to acquire his favorite vegetables. He felt curious if Khiroda felt remorse recalling the offences of her degenerated past. He entered the prison for women.

He heard the sound of an altercation from afar. As he entered the room he found Khiroda engaged in a heated quarrel with the guard. Mohit laughed in his mind; he thought the nature of women was like that! Death is nearing, yet they wouldn't give up bickering. It seemed that they would fight with the minions of Yama when they reached *Yamlok*.

Mohit thought lamentation should be roused in her mind by means of proper advice and derision. No sooner had he approached Khiroda with this noble intention than she said pitifully with folded hands, "O dear judge-*babu*! Please sir, tell him to return me my ring."

Upon questioning he came to know that the ring was hidden inside Khiroda's hair -- the guard's eyes having accidentally fallen on it, he snatched it from her.

Mohit smiled in his mind again. A day or two after the woman would be ascending the hanging platform, and yet she could not give up her greed for the ring; jewelry is everything to women!

He said to the guards, "Where, show me the ring." The guard handed the ring to him.

He felt like touching burning coal; he was startled. On one side of the ring there was a tiny picture of a bearded-mustachioed man painted in oil on the ivory of the ring, and above it, engraved in gold was -- Binodchandra!

Mohit raised his eyes from the ring and looked at Khiroda's face. The visage brought in his mind another teary, lovingly gentle, bashfully diffident face encountered twenty-four years before; this face shared marked similarity with that countenance.

Mohit looked at the gold ring once again, and when slowly lifted his face after that the fallen, unchaste woman that stood in front assumed the appearance of the golden goddess in the brightly aureate aura of a tiny circlet of gold worn around the fingers.

Glossary of Non-English Terms

Yama: Lord of death.

Yamllok: Hell or land of death; city of *Yama*.

Kartika: the name of the god who is the commander-in-chief of heavenly forces; an extremely good-looking (young) man.

Babu: gentleman

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