

MY WOMB

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When bridegroom along with bride got into flowery car and departed from the house, suddenly mother silenced her tears. Her heart was filled with enthusiasm that marriage was performed properly and perfectly. Father took a heavy sigh and cleansing his spectacles through his handkerchief. His sister was wiping her sweat and tears on her face by sari and said to self 'Let future be seen only in future'.

Sadhana for the past fifteen days stormed the house and this led everybody apprehensive about her mood in Mehendi function and her participation in it. As a bride would she veil it, would she agree for bridal makeup, these questions are far away the day one she got engaged. She took off her jeans and wore traditional yellow color salwar-kameez covering her head with yellow chunni. Silently doing all her work, opposing the marriage proposal is futile, she accepted completely that marriage is inevitable. Born as a girl she has to get married irrespective of her desire to study, to do job, or to live life on her own terms independently.

At her in-law's place, as a newly-wed she was performing all her duties mechanically, dispassionately, welcoming the guest with a cosmetic smile and conveying her regards in a traditional way by bowing her head as a mark of respect for the elders and also extending hospitality towards them by inviting for snacks and meals. Her in laws were impressed by her simplicity and soon she was recognized as an educated and cultured bride in her neighbourhood. Everybody appreciated her affable mannerisms but she was displeased as she felt it was adding salt to her injury. She sensed a conspiracy long back to captivate her in such formalities. She decided to deal the issue tactfully so that she can continue her studies at her in law's place in tranquility. She became embodiment of silence and humbleness in her engrossed feelings so that she can understand the temperament of the people around her.

It was her first visit to her parents place after her marriage. She was very upset and met her relatives with annoyance. Her mother lovingly kissed her forehead and said "Be devoid of devilish eye, my darling daughter looking bewitchingly beautiful".

'Yes, completely she appears to be an exuberant doll' said her paternal aunt.

"I am not going to be flattered, saying all don't tease me". Sadhana said in sulky tone.

'My honey! Why are you so annoyed? You got married in a good family, your husband is a gentlemen and what else you want? Maternal aunt said it with a hearty laugh.

'I want to top in my MA finals...' Sadhana said it with a piercing look.

'So do it now', paternal aunt suggested.

'That I will do it' sulky and thoughtful Sadhana instantly smiled and her paternal aunt embraced her affectionately.

'Stop being temperamental and understand the difference of lifestyle at your father's and husband's place for a happy life' mother uttered these words with sadness.

‘Ok, Mom...!’ Sadhana said dismissively and moved towards her room to take out her clothes from the suitcase. She was confident that her in laws will respect her aspiration to continue her studies.

Sadhana’s ambition since her school days was to become an IPS officer. She was fascinated with the role of police especially rotating baton, blowing the whistle, charging penalty, thrashing the offenders in lock-up, keep them in custody, exposing the corruption, arresting the culprits, getting bullet injury while chasing the criminals and one day sacrifice their life in the service of mankind. Police job romanticized her and was too eager to wear police uniform but as she grew older her illusion was shattered about police role and its involvement in corrupting the system. Her new understanding did not deter her to achieve her dream to join the police instead was more determined not to be a corrupt police in reshaping the map of the city free from bribery. Later years she often read depressing and disturbing news, felt furious, firmly resolved to arrest those rapists who torment the soul and the body but this time her dream crushed at her cousin’s marriage when Sandeep’s relative chosen her as a perspective daughter in law for their family. She repeatedly urged her family that she was not prepared for the marriage but no one took her seriously. All her relatives praised the boy as nice guy, having handsome salary and good family and did not consider her MA examination to be a substantial reason for the postponement of the marriage.

Marriage brought many changes in Sadhana’s life, took her away from studies. She was engaged 24x7 in daily routine and preoccupied in fulfilling her responsibilities as a newly-wed, for her studies became a distant priority, scarcely got time to read newspaper and once free from her work she falls into deep sleep. She felt exhausted due to tedious housework being occupied in daily niceties and since the day one at her in law’s place as she was captivated in an image of an ideal daughter in law. So now it was impossible for her to come out from the created web of appreciation. Once or twice she told Sandeep but causally he replied “who stops you to write an exam?”

From her parent’s place she obtained her books to prepare for her exams meanwhile she discovered her pregnancy and was frightened her life to be gloomy but at home family was happy and delightful, kept her books back in cupboard. She was distress and unable to adjust with the new changes within her. What about her twenty two years of long knit dream, will she be un-knitting it? She never imagined for an ideal home, children, husband, but had a desire to be loved. This feeling of being in love and to be loved becomes more intensified when she relished romantic poetry, story and films that generated perfect climate for love but studies was the most paramount part of her life. In difficult times also she was dedicated towards her studies and this same Sadhana seems to be helpless before the powerful situation. Both the families were exchanging the cheerful greetings, distributing sweets & fruits and celebrating the happy news joyfully. Here, Sadhana and Sandeep relation was strained and tensed as she disclosed to him, that now she doesn’t want a baby as she was more inclined to appear for MA exams. Sandeep’s delighted face was now anguished and her face was drenched in tears, after a while in silence, he told her “It’s not possible”.

‘Why?’

‘Because I want a baby and this child belongs to both of us’

‘I agree but my whole year will be ruined’ Sadhana pleaded Sandeep.

‘And what about the baby that is growing in you’ he said in astonishingly displeased tone.

‘Sandeep just think...it’s difficult to study with the child’s responsibility’ Sadhana tried to justify.

‘I will make it easy for you, you will be free from household responsibilities and mother will manage everything. For your exams you have two months and that’s sufficient time for good preparation.’ Sandeep talked to her tenderly after he looked at her teary-eyes.

‘Ok!’ said Sadhana when Sandeep spoke to her lovingly. It was pricking her all the time that neither her family nor her in laws encouraged her to study. She questioned retrospectively, “who is she, a person or a domesticated animal to whom people love but wanted to keep in fetters, but why?”

Sadhana’s was pained with Sandeep’s attitude. She was experiencing morning sickness, unable to concentrate in her studies and her movements were controlled, advising her to take rest. On many occasions there was an emotional outburst of sob and anger, all the time the thought perturbed her, ‘why she is sacrificing her own dream for fulfilling the dreams of the family?’ What’s wrong if all this would have happened a year later and at least she would have prepared for these changes? After observing these new behavioral changes, he told his mother, that she was unwell. They suspected but Sadhana dodged the matter saying vomiting was due to outside food.

It was Sandeep’s announcement that hampered her plan for abortion otherwise she already took a decision to abort the child. Her inner self was revolting and before she could react, there were baby shower celebrations. She was given amulet and her mother in law was more considerate and affectionate towards her health. She felt she was sweetly imprisoned. Sometimes she feels to scream and flutter to fly like a parrot in the cage, but the strength of the iron bars in the cage greatly disappoints her vision. Doctor expressed his worry over her high blood pressure that made her family members to be more conscious of her health. This caring concern transformed her whole approach within her and towards her people into a meaningful relationship. And for her these relationships appear to be like a tangle which has many layers developing into a strong chain, tough for anyone to be liberated.

Monthly her pregnancy was progressing; her revolting nature was subdued due to her physical changes and was increasingly considerate about the baby’s health due to this she started reading books on motherhood. Sandeep felt attracted towards her and admired her growing attachment with the womb. The tension between them was diffused and everywhere they heard that they will be blessed with a son. Internally, Sandeep wished to have a younger Sandeep and did all the shopping for the baby boy. He selected blue color not pink one, instead of frock he preferred baba suit and also prepared the naming list of the boys like sameer, sanjay, suresh, etc.

For her, nine months of pregnancy has progressed quickly, she was in labor room anxious about the childbirth and till evening she was in labor pain. She came into senses when she heard baby cries & also congratulatory words around her that she delivered a baby girl. Initially her mood was dull but instantly felt joyful that she became mother of a daughter. She was impatient to see the baby, for her, her baby was the most beautiful girl in the world, as it’s her formation, her own creation, it’s an origination...but she was too weak to speak soon she was in deep slumber.

She saw in awareness that she was surrounded by her people who were worried for her. She tried to get up but failed in her attempt. She saw at her left side, her baby, having rosy complexion and black hair, sleeping in the cradle quietly. Smilingly she saw the baby & physically, she was charged up with unusual confidence. Sister in law greeted Sadhana, she had pleasant feeling and degree of her happiness was similar to that of her result day. When Sandeep glanced at her, she was entrapped in euphoria, as if he was conveying that “baby belongs to you, it is an extension of your body and kind of your replication”.

Her parental relatives affectionately greeted and blessed her and for them, her mother in law distributed sweets with warmth and affability. In her merriment, she failed to remember her exams, studies her perpetual worry and an inseparable part of her existence was broken and separated from her by merciless time. Day and night she engrossed her time in baby love and care.

Women are trained and groomed to be more practical in life and Sadhana understood hard realities, accordingly she molded her nature. She thought of a tree which was nurtured by the gardener and passer by consider themselves to be fortunate to take rest under its shadow. She was enjoying her responsibility with promptness and visualizing her daughter to achieve unfulfilled dreams of her life. In her thoughts she lives her complete span of life and in that life she finds Saritha as a police commissioner, reshaping and redefining the whole society and honor's her mother for all her accomplishments. In TV, radio and newspaper interviews, people will be glad to know, that mothers like Sadhana are the source of inspiration behind every successful girl and she is happy in her dreamland where she enters & exists conveniently. She would immerse into her dream world to such an extent that it becomes difficult for her to identify whether she is in dream or dream is in her.

Saritha was just six months old and Sadhana was once again on a family way. Prior to it too, she was honored with motherhood but this time also her spirits were high, anticipating all the attention which she enjoyed in her first pregnancy. Mother in law again in parrot fashion wished for grandson. Sandeep wished to have two children, always emphasized this contextually many times to Sadhana and it doesn't matter to him if they are sons or daughters. Sandeep clear cut message has no impact on his mother and on his wife, as both of them this time were aspiring for son. Sadhana as any pregnant women, wished for a son and one day restlessly discussed with her mother in law, who advised her 'why not get it confirm from the doctor about the gender of the baby'? Her curiosity got wings, she ignored Sandeep's denial in afternoon, along with her mother in law she went to clinic.

The happier they went, sadder they came back. Her mother in law lost her temper in utter disappointment and by the time she reached home, she decided that Sadhana should abort the child. She thought why to form girl's battalion; even difficult for Sandeep to support the family but her dilemma was how to convey this to her daughter in law. She passed her days in tension and frequently getting irritated on small issues. Earlier she used to pamper Saritha on her toddler activities but now she gets annoyed with the same when Sarita hold her sari and tries to walk. Once on such occasion, distress by her dissatisfied wish, she unintentionally shed her sari which Sarita was holding and walked away. Hearing loud cries, she looked back, and saw the baby fall on face and begun to bleed. The whole situation acutely disturbed her and hugged the tiny tot and was sobbing her heart out.

'What happened mummy?' seeing her condition Sadhana asked her.

'Nothing' mother in law nodded her head but was still crying.

'At least tell me the reason behind your shedding tears' holding her baby she asked her mother in law.

'Desire for grandson makes me restless so much.....,' while saying this she abruptly stopped, her eyes were moist.

'So what's wrong in it, we are human, bound to have desires....why you are so troubled, Sadhana said in giddiness.

'I don't want another granddaughter, Sadhana.' Saying this, she took heavy breath and with her sari she wiped her face.

'What we can do now?'

‘We can...’

‘We can...what do you mean?’

‘We both can do, if you want...’

‘If I ...’

‘Yes’

‘No, mummy.....no.’

Sadhana was appalled and looking intently at her mother in law’s face that was revealing her ambivalent feelings and her pleading eyes. Nervously she looked away and hurriedly carried Saritha, firmly held her, and rushed towards her room, her entire existence was trembling in apprehension. Once, she too had a similar thought but now...it’s impossible. My daughters are not only my children but my dreams, I also want a son but not at the cost of taking away my daughter’s life.....certainly not.

At home circumstances were not very amiable, Sadhana’s denial yielded bitterness in their otherwise healthy relationship, for this, she also felt an ache in her heart. Entire day which used to be brighten up by their conversations and now no more on talking terms. Apart from that, mother in law increasingly points out her mistakes on each issue and also taunts her in front of their guests. Due to intolerable situation at home, Sadhana decided to surrender in the interest of the family and one day afternoon she spoke to her mother in law.

‘Mummy, I understand your misery but...I also want to become a mother of a son. Your desire was also been my desire.’ After saying this, Sadhana kept quiet. Mother in law didn’t respond instead she bit her sari, sadhana stood for a while and afterthought she sat on bed.

‘Mummy, I promise you, I will abort my third pregnancy if it carries a female fetus....trust me. Sadhana’s voice choked, seeing the house as if a battlefield where she was dealing sensitivity with diplomacy and especially related to womanhood, to her vision and to her creation.

Sadhana didn’t wait and left the room in haste. Mother in law was startled and later realized sadhana’s revelation. She knew Sandeep’s predetermination for two children, but here, Sadhana promised for third pregnancy. Her heart filled with kindness and affection for Sadhana, since one month; all alone she was managing the child & the household work and tolerated her rude behavior. I am ashamed of my indifference towards my pregnant daughter in law, from today onwards I will take care of her, and after all two daughters will be born not twelve to increase the family members. Certainly third pregnancy will deliver the son. She came out happily from her sulking chamber.

At home again the amiable atmosphere prevailed but Sadhana’s mind was unstable. With each progressive day, Sandeep’s pressure on any one of them, for family planning was emphasized. In spite of taking precautions, second child happened, this time Sandeep did not want to take any chances. He observed Sadhana’s general weakness and ceased his insistence for operation. Sadhana said gently to her husband that she too doesn’t want the third child and asked him to have faith in her. The matter was resolved and meanwhile she delivered girl child.

At home, on the occasion of second child there were no jubilant celebrations. Sandeep was astonished at his mother’s silence on the event, that instead of grandson; granddaughter was born to her but simultaneously felt happy with her unemotional response otherwise would have been difficult to tackle the matter. So what if there were no jubilant celebrations on the birth of her second daughter, but Sadhana’s faith grew stronger as she developed two more hands & two more eyes in the form of her two daughters. Sadhana and her daughters; together have six hands

would be suffice to face any insurmountable challenges in the near future. She started dreaming for her second daughter that once she grew up she would become an IAS officer and she will reshape the map of her village that was attacked by unemployment, drought, and poverty since many years.

Most of the time, people despite of taking care land up in the same trouble. In spite of Sandeep's caution, after six-seven months, Sadhana became third time pregnant and he was shocked and confused what to say. He was bewildered about how they can be so irresponsible or is it destiny that played the role? This puzzlement was resolved when Sadhana said her body has no strength and stamina to continue her third pregnancy and in the coming week she would go for abortion. Sadhana said her decision so causally that left Sandeep speechless, no doubt her sentence relieved him from many impediments and gave him confidence to tackle the issue with proper understanding and maturity.

At afternoon sunbeam seen on veranda and on her laps, mother in law was pampering her granddaughter; nearby Saritha was also playing and Sadhana spoke to her in lower pitch.

'Mummy I am going to clinic.'

'What?' mother in law face was delighted but later she restrained.

'Yes' Sadhana looked at the ground.

'Shall I Come?'

'Who will take care of them?'

'Yes, I have forgotten completely.....take care.' Lovingly said her mother in law and with folded hands looked up for god's grace.

Sadhana's heart was unsettled. Two contradictory thoughts of the same situation, at one hand she strongly feels for abortion but on other hand she was curious to know the fetus of her creation, in conundrum of thoughts she reached clinic. Today there was so much rush and found some ladies sad and some were endlessly taunted. Bad tempered mother in law criticized in murmur, when they heard about the girl child. Now it was her turn and seeing the result nurse happily laughed at her.

'What happen?'

'Distribute sweets, it is son.'

Son! Sadhana was very excited and thrilled.

'This time your mother in law will welcome you with an open heart...isn't it?'

'Yes,' Sadhana said happily.

Throughout her way to home she was disturbed by her thoughts and anticipating the future with her son who would be a constant threat to her daughters. Before the grandson, mother in law will never treat her granddaughters fairly and may be, after being blessed with a son, Sandeep may change his attitude towards his daughters. What would be the prospective changes at home? What to do? Shall I inform about the happy news? Shall I keep my promise which I committed to Sandeep? ... What to do?

Battling with her conflicting thoughts she reached home, completely shattered&was trembled to look at her mother in law's hopeful eyes. She observed Sadhana's sad face and supposed...again girl, but she wanted to listen from her so she asked her.

'What happen, Sadhana?'

'What to say?' Sadhana anxiously grasped her mother in law and cried profusely. Her mother in law, tears in eyes, with love and care consoling her so that her pent up emotions get away.

The relationship between mother in law and daughter in law was based on the same faithful commitment for each other though mother in law was unaware of the whole truth; she continued to take care of her and her granddaughters but Sadhana knew the truth was suffering in agony. She cannot conceal her pregnancy from Sandeep and at the same time she does not want to reveal about conceiving the son. Due to dilemma, she did not inform Sandeep about her intended visit to clinic. Even if she shares her anguish, how and in what way they could have resolved her troubles and whosoever listens will certainly speak these words.

‘Son’! How fortunate you are?

‘Abortion of a son, an absolute sin’!

‘Giving birth to a son is considered to wipe out the sins of last seven births as per our tradition. It seems you have lost your senses and taken decision for abortion.

‘At old age, son in law will not take responsibility and it has always been son’s obligation to take care of the parents’.

‘It is part of your body, nurture the child, don’t be weak and be courageous to protest against the injustice and exploitation meted out to women’.

‘If ... If as usual, in spite of her opposition, everything remains unstirred.... Then...?’

Prolonged inbuilt tension made her sick and her secrecy was revealed by the doctor when he informed about her high blood pressure. Sandeep was greatly embarrassed and here also there was a quiet agreement that they don’t want third child. They have to provide a comfortable life to their daughters and this understanding of the issue constrained them from further discussions as everything was pre decided. Sandeep’s inclination turned into firm decision and one day he freed himself. For this, Sadhana has to undergone the pain and suffering for the last time. She was able to read the facial expression of emotions of her husband and her mother in law but she was in endless torment. Once again, her desire for son will be unfulfilled if she doesn’t continue her pregnancy and if she delivers the son, what will happen to her dreams which she dreamt for her daughters. Her disturbing thoughts appear to be in a conversation.

‘There are so many plants that get firmly rooted in earth and swing with natural momentum. Some plants get withered. A lot of sacrifice is required to transform an agriculture farm to cereals. Sometime goods, sometime life, and sometime desires...?’

‘Do I need to sacrifice my desire... desires are like ebb and flow of the tides, they have no basic existence, but the pound, the river, the sea, and even the well; have the reality and this reality is life. To satisfy my desire I need to come out of this turmoil of the times, this is my real test, this will be self-victory, this is my reality.

Sadhana successfully came out from her constant struggle of mind, body and soul. Her sensitivity was focused on society’s differential attitude between male and female considerations and this attitude will remain stronger and derive its strength by women’s adherence to its rigid norms. It’s her womb and she has every right to conceive or abort the child. It must be her choice; if she refuses to give birth to the son then what will happen to the society, there are some people in the society who are against the survival of the female from where they originated. These people are law makers and they pass judgment on women. We women also contribute, resulting into lack of mental stability and loss of self to such an extent that we protest against our own gender. No, Sadhana will never revolt against herself. It’s her life, with her desires she will create her life. She will not only measure the ground but also the sky, this will be a real identity of an independent woman. She will retain this identity and proudly reveal it to the world.

Appointment was taken for abortion and on that day, mother in law along with her granddaughters remained at home. Sandeep accompanied Sadhana. Everyone was silent and with

their own mindset they were looking at the problem. Two innocent girls had no voice in the entire struggle which was moving like a quiet wind and they were unaware of the fact that they are going to be deprived of a brother. They were oblivious to the reasons that their mother was revolting for their bright and secure future. Uncertain, pressurized by time, only future will tell, how far as a mother her sacrifice can be meaningful? Will these two sisters after knowing the truth in right perspective; will they understand their mother's decision and accept it? These questions hanging on future will be answered by the powerful time.

On each step, on each juncture have thousand turns, thousand questions, confirm that life in itself is perplexed, but who perplexed the life? The life also gives the people the capacity to find out the solution then why people are so bewildered with the problems. Individually, people are trying to reach the solutions. Is it not possible to collectively oppose against these rigid norms or these personal efforts have no connection with the general societal reforms. Why this question aroused? And this question subjected the simple life into vicious cycle of inhumanity.

'As long as Sadhana was in the operation theatre, Sandeep who was ignorant of the truth was in deep thinking. He wanted to tell Sadhana that she need not undergo such pain again in her lifetime as he did his duty and there she was on bed, drained emotionally, now completely free from future conceptions and determine to maintain this secrecy as a silent protest but the question reappear again and again, 'what is this protest?' instead of wipe out the other, it seeks the sacrifice from Sadhana.

When Sadhana reached home she was shattered physically, mentally and emotionally, & her mother in law hugged her and whispered don't be sad, if god favor's you will be soon pregnant and this time certainly son will born to you. Sadhana sat with her younger daughter, held her on laps, lovingly rubbed her tiny cheeks with her cheeks. Saritha encircle her affectionate hands around her mother's neck and kissed her. Sadhana felt gradual reduction in her physical pain and slept on her bed, along with her daughter's on both sides and closed her eyes to cherish her dream for her daughters.

**ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF STORY 'APNI KHOKH' BY N.SUBHADRA CHARI,
FROM 'NASERA SHARMA KE CHUNINDA KAHANIYA' WRITTEN BY NASERA
SHARMA**