



Readers' Forum



She Could be Anywoman

We seek only to give words to those who cannot speak.

from "Silence", by Anasuya Sengupta

On 23 March 2004, a small article appeared in the Hyderabad dailies citing the murder of a man by his wife. The article said the man was a habitual drunkard. Lingamma, his wife, stabbed him in the stomach with a broken bottle in a fit of anger. The article said she was in her forties. She has been arrested and will probably be convicted of murder.

Lingamma could in fact be "Anywoman". Domestic violence is widespread and does not emanate from individuals alone. There are many who support the web of domestic violence, if not with their active participation, then by tacit consent or unwillingness to protest. The abuser feels that society and his friends and family will take his side and accept his justifications for his actions. The victim knows that society will see the abuse she suffers as a sign of her supposed failures and shortcomings. The cycle of abuse perpetuates itself through the generations, and percolates to other households, where the men learn to imitate the abuser, to consider it the appropriate way to treat women in the family. A conspiracy of silence provides a safe haven to those that abuse and prevents the victims from finding succour.

The dialogue that follows is between Anywoman and her mother, who, after all, is Anywoman too. It is an imaginary dialogue, a work of fiction. However, Anywoman will tell you that it is very, very real.

Foolish woman, what a great crime you have committed?

My mother, I know it is a crime.

He was your pati parmashwar, your suhaag.

Yes, my mother, he was my husband.

Then, unfortunate woman, why did you do this?

Mother he came home drunk and shouting.

Hundreds of men come home drunk everyday. Do their wives murder them? Men work, they earn, they need some relaxation. You cannot expect them to sit in the house all day like women.

Mother, do I not work?

A woman must work. It is your karma. And look at you. Now you are a widow, an inauspicious woman. People will avert their eyes from you for fear of your misfortune casting a shadow on them.

At least I do not have to live with him anymore.

So you had it planned all along! I see it was not a fit of anger, as you told the police.

Mother, it was a fit of anger. He came in and started shouting at me and then held the back of my neck. He was rolling on his feet, shaking me by my neck and asking me what I had cooked for his dinner though he had taken the

last rupee from the house in the morning. Yes, I have wished that he would die, not once but a hundred times, when he came home drunk after spending the money I had set aside for the children's school fees. I have a thousand times made plans of poisoning him in the very *tharra* that he drank, of choking him once he passed out in his drunken stupor. But, alas, I was not brave enough; I never dared to do anything.

So you should be happy now that you have dared.

Happy? No I am not.

You should not be, murderess of your own husband. Now who will feed you? Your brother barely makes enough to feed his family.

I will probably go to jail for murder, so you may not have to worry. But I am at peace now.

What peace is there, who will marry your brother's daughter, who will give a girl to your son? And have you thought about your own daughter? We will be blessed if her in-laws don't turn her out for this. Every one I meet asks me, "Did your daughter kill her husband?" Such violence in a woman, and at your age too!

My age, yes, the only thing I am unhappy about is my age.

Now why are you worrying about your age of all things.

All these years I worried about so many things. When he came home drunk and fondled me roughly I tolerated it because I could not complain. Is it not a man's right with

the woman he has married? Otherwise why should he provide her with a roof over her head? When he criticised my cooking and my upbringing I listened in silence resolving to improve and remove the cause for his anger. When he slapped me I kept quiet because I had young children and I did not want them to be fatherless. When he kicked me for not switching on the lights fast enough I never told anyone because my daughter needed a father to do her *kanyadaan*.

So now you don't need him and that's why you killed him.

No, I never needed him. I was wrong. You were wrong.

Me, what have I done wrong? I tolerated your father's foibles till his dying day.

Yes, and that was wrong.

What was wrong? Your father was a good man.

Yes he was a good man in so many ways but he used to bully you in the house. I have seen you leave my younger brother crying in the crib in order to serve him tea at his demand.

He was just particular about time, wanted everything to be proper that's all.

And he would shout at you when my brother cried, as if it was your fault that the child cried.

He just didn't like children crying.

And once when you had your arms in the dough, and my baby brother was crawling towards the lighted stove, you asked him to pick up the child and he slapped you for that.

Men in our community don't take care of children.

Yes, you were wrong.

How was I wrong, I never raised my voice against him?

Yes, and that is why you were wrong.

You have murdered your husband and now you say that I, who never opposed my husband, have done wrong? What justice!

Yes mother, that is what was wrong, you did not oppose him even when he

was unfair. You tolerated all that he dished out to you.

Ha, why should I have opposed him? To be beaten? It is all these ideas of opposition that have brought you these beatings and cast this shadow on our family.

My husband did not abuse me because I opposed him. He abused me because I tolerated his abuse.

If you have all this great understanding then why were you beaten?

Because mother that is what I learnt from you. The way I learnt to talk and then clean and cook from you



Jolly Rohangi

I also learnt that a woman has to endure the sufferings imposed upon her by the fact that she is born a female. You were wrong to teach me this and because you were wrong I suffered.

So now your suffering has ended. Are you happy now after bringing shame to your father's house?

I am no longer bothered about the shame. It was your fear of shame that has been the reason why I have been tortured and miserable all these years. If you did not have such a fear of shame you would have taken me back into my father's house so many years ago. It was the fear of that shame of yours which took from my feet the power to step out of the doors of that house where I was treated like a slave.

Take you back? Who would have fed you? Once a girl is married her

father's house is no longer home for her.

Yes I knew I had nowhere to go. So I waited for tomorrow, hoping it would not be like yesterday. But more often than not every tomorrow that came was a darker and grimmer version of the past. I sometimes thought that it was not possible to sink lower and a few days later I found that I was wrong, there were worse things that could happen. My bundle of woes grew heavier and heavier and pulled me down even when I was not being abused. Tell me mother did you not feel for me?

My unhappy daughter, you know that I do not make decisions. When your father was alive everything happened the way he wanted. Now his son is head of the house and I have to take his permission to spend a paisa of my own husband's money.

I guess you were not really wrong, mother, you probably could do nothing other than what you did. It's a very sorry thing.

Yes, a woman who has killed her husband has a lot to be sorry about.

Oh, I'm not sorry about that. I remember very well how he held me from the back of my neck, painfully pinching the loose skin at my nape and pulling the hair together with one hand while he was shaking the bottle in my face with the other hand, and the outpouring of filthy abuses and foul breath hitting my senses. He was falling against me and then pulling back to keep his balance. The pain in my neck was excruciating as he used it to support himself as he wobbled back and forth and the bottle was hitting my eye. As he fell back once more I grabbed the bottle from him and lashed out at him, maybe three.. four.. times? Even as the bottle broke, he left my neck and lunged at me trying to grab it, I pushed him away with both hands. I was still holding the bottle. No, I am not sorry that he has died, I am only sorry because my relief has come so late.

Daksha, Hyderabad □