



*I am a woman now,
my wings are clipped.
No cruelty was done to me,
just sweet domesticity.*

– Parvati C. Mazumdar

In the shade of the big *peepul* in my *Nana's* garden is the *more-pankhi* my *Maa* planted when she was just six; as old as I now am. I pluck the flat, lace-like leaves of this *vidya* tree; they really *do* spread out like peacock feathers! *Maa* told me how she used to place *vidya* leaves between the pages of her schoolbooks. That's an easy way of becoming wise and intelligent! I want to be intelligent like *Maa*.

"It's a pity my tree didn't grow to a greater height. I've seen really tall *more-pankhis* in public gardens," says *Maa*. She seems very disappointed.

"But *they* grow in great, open spaces *Maa*. You told me that all plants need space and light to grow well."

"There are lots of plants that grow in the shade. But you're right: I shouldn't have planted the *more-pankhi* under the *peepul*." *Maa* speaks gently and softly.

"Didn't you know that the big tree wouldn't let the *vidya* grow well?"

"I don't even remember whether I thought about that at all! My

summer holidays had started, and I was so excited about my new hobby. Our *mali* had promised to teach me gardening, and he brought the *vidya* seedling for me to plant. He placed it in the shed and went away. I was not going to wait a whole day for him to come again! I wanted to plant the seedling right then: in the middle of the searing afternoon. I had chosen a nice spot for it at the farther edge of the lawn."

"So why didn't you plant it there?"

"Because *Nani* just would not let me go out into the afternoon sun! She wanted to protect me."

"From what?"

"All sorts of illnesses that mothers unnecessarily imagine. As a compromise, she allowed me to plant it in the shade of the *peepul*."

I really thank God for my *Nana's* garden. I live with *Maa* and Papa in a small flat not very far from *Nana's* house. So, whenever *Maa* feels like keeping things what she calls 'simple and informal', she just walks across, with me in tow. "Your Papa takes his role as son-in-law too seriously," she jokes. Except that I can't see what's funny, and she doesn't seem to have enjoyed the joke either.

In our tiny flat there's not much scope for messing around. So, I just have to spend time doing proper things: painting, playing with my dolls, reading. My dolls find the sea-green fruit from the *vidya* tree, a size bigger than peas, simply delicious. Even though they smell bitter.

The *Vidya* Tree

○ Nidhi S. Asthana

Of course, I can't read very difficult stories: in which many strange things happen one after the other. When I get bored with what I *can* read, I ask *Maa* to read to me. This has its own problems.

She begins by trying to make the stories real for me. She cheeps and growls through animal fables. But with longer stories, she loses steam. It's almost as if I lose her to the story. She can't help herself. Her telling doesn't keep up with her reading. She reads on silently and then she has to force herself to come back to where she had left me, wondering what happened next. All strange fables seem to grab her and pull her into their world. And if I don't poke her in the ribs and ask her, "Then what happened?" she would most likely remain in that world. Sometimes, when I am not in the mood to hear a story in slow motion, I leave her with my book and run off to play.

Maa gets books for herself from the library. But when she reads them in between all her other work, she always looks a wee bit angry and even scolds me for small things. She hates reading when all the other things also have to be done. I can easily make out when *Maa* is enjoying her read: she is lost to all of us and has to be shaken to be brought back.

"To be lost in a book is a luxury," she says sadly; she looks sadder. This may sound strange, but she sometimes refuses to go to meet other people who drop in at *Nani's*,

though she wants *me* to get to know everybody! So she drops me off, and gets back as soon as she can to the flat for a good read. I don't mind.

With *Dadi*, *Maa* does not have any choice. *Dadi* brings *Maa* a lot of gifts, but a lot of busy-ness too. When she comes to stay, *Dadi* insists that *Maa* accompany her to all our various relatives, even the ones Papa calls 'distant'. I don't understand this, but some distant relatives live close to our flat and a lot of close relatives live far away. Anyhow, I know from *Maa's* face that she doesn't enjoy being forced into spending hours away from home. If it isn't us visiting someone, it's someone visiting us: this means day-long cooking for *Maa*. In any case, *Dadi* likes to eat different, different things: visitors or no visitors.

"You should have been a lecturer like Papa. He sits in the library and reads all he likes. He even



reads at breakfast while you keep giving him toasts. He doesn't even look up to say thank you. Why don't you be a lecturer too *Maa*?"

"I don't have a Ph.D. like Papa. He spent many years studying. I didn't."

"Why not? Didn't you like studying?"

"I loved it. We had a wonderful library in college."

"Did you get A's?"

"Yes, lots of A's."

"Didn't you want more? Is a Ph.D better than all A's? Why didn't you keep studying?"

"*Nani* found Papa for me to marry. And then I had to move away to another city."

"Why couldn't you stay and get more A's? Didn't *Nani* know that you could stay and read in the wonderful library, and get more A's?"

"She did."

"Then why?"

"So that I could be with Papa. So that I would not have to be alone."

"But I think you are *happy* when you are alone! At least when you read. Why did *Nani* want to send you with Papa?"

"She wanted to see me happy. Maybe she wanted to protect me."

"From what?" □

Nidhi Asthana lives and works in New Delhi.

Women Bhakt Poets



"No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.

Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head

Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.

Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,

Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,

Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermillion in my hair parting,

The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.

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