

Bhikhu

Bhikhu is my age.
My heart tells me to play with him,
But my mother forbids me says
Bhikhu is the son of our sweeper

untouchable.

His mother arrives at dawn everyday to carry away faeces and garbage.

Bhikhu comes too

We merely stare at each other

I within the threshold and he beyond

timid and timorous.



Illustrations: Suparna



Today my sister is to be married
The house is as ornamented as she is-
White-washed walls bathing in the brilliant light,
Strands of multi-colored electric bulbs like garlands,
Fragrant rows of sweet –smelling, auspicious mango leaves every-where

And I,

In fresh, starched *kurta* and *pyjama*

A jacket with a million stars, gold-braided cap,

Full of pride, anticipating the arrival of the bridegroom

Run outside and stop in the portico.

I see Bhikhu standing in the alley far away

Without shorts or shoes, in the same crushed shirt he wears everyday.

His vacant marble eyes advance towards me, make my bones shiver

And come and stop at my gold-braided cap

I stand without volition.

Bhikhu' s grandmother sits next to him

A faint sound emanates from her toothless mouth:

“May you live for ever little prince.”

I am embarrassed, stand a while worrying the loose earth with my toes

Then run inside.

The sound swells like the sea. ... “the bride-groom’s cavalcade has arrived”

The court-yard fills with people

The choral chant of priests

Mingles with the popular film song ‘*raja ki aayegi barat*’ on the loud-speaker

And creates a strange, unmelodious cacophony.

I place my hands over my ears

And run, careening into rows of people busy eating.



The fragrance of sweets has spread to the slums at the edge of the city.
 The whole alley is full of untouchables
 I look for Bhikhu and his grandmother.
 Bhikhu is still standing where he had been
 His flinty eyes glowing in the dark like glass marbles.
 "Little prince is the feast over?" The grandmother's impatient voice
 Rises above the noise and swims towards me
 I peep into the house.
 The guests have risen
 Some people are collecting the leftovers from plates
 Sweets bitten in half, smashed sweet meats, half eaten *puris*,
 Chewed vegetables and spattered curd
 Swept into baskets by callous hands.



The baskets are brought out to the alley
 Soon the activity turns to turbulence
 In the impenetrable dark, gray shadows with gaping bags rush to the house
 And a solid wall is erected around the portico
 Not of bricks, but of untouchables
 Bhikhu and his grandmother are left behind by this flood.
 I run like an arrow to the kitchen
 And emerge with fresh *puris* and sweets in both hands.
 But,
 Bhikhu and his grandmother are not to be found
 The dark alley has swallowed them.
 In my tearful eyes, red threads of rage emerge
 My trembling lips want to scream,
 My heart begs for the courage to toss the rotten food out of those tainted bags,
 But my fists slacken
 The sweets and *puris* in my grip begin to slip
 And I, slowly
 Go down the stairs, bumping into people,
 Carving a tunnel through the wall of humans
 With an intense desire to escape from this suffocating alley, far, far away.

But find
 Myself standing exactly where once Bhikhu had stood.
 My *kurta* is shredded into thousand threads,
 Stars from my jacket are lost in the dust,
 And the gold-braided cap lies in the dirt trampled by countless feet.



-Mohan Varma
 (Translated from Hindi by Nonda Chatterjee)