



SHORT STORY

## Against the Current

○ Durga Devi Mukhopadhyaya

Translated from Bengali by Subodh Kumar Basu

Shailo was married off as soon as she passed out of college. She is now *nau-bou* (new bride), the fourth daughter-in-law of the family. She is deeply interested in literature and can claim to write some herself. Amidst myriads of daily chores she tries to snatch the few moments she can, to sit down with a pen and paper to write.

At about ten in the morning one day, she was busy cooking when suddenly an interesting idea flashed in her mind. She put the flame on simmer, covered the pan, pulled out her notebook and picked up a pen. Just then *badh-di*, her eldest sister-in-law, came in and asked, "Have you added the fish head to the dish?"

"No, I cooked it with pulses."

"Then add a little mustard and poppy seed paste to it."

Shailo left her notebook and got up. After the midday meal, she went to her room, closed the door and took out the notebook and pen and tried to recapture the idea that had come to her a few hours earlier, but in vain. There was a knock on the door, "Are you asleep *nau-di*?"

Shailo got up, opened the door and said, "Come in Shyamoli."

Shyamoli said, "No, not now. My son is sleeping. Could you please look after him? I am going for a matinee show. On my way home, I have to do some shopping, so I will be delayed. But I hope to be back by seven thirty. When the boy wakes up, give him some biscuits and lozenges; they are on the shelf. Milk time is four o'clock. After he has his milk, please change his clothes. I better get going. Ramola and the others are waiting for me."

Shailo again sat down with her notebook. But that idea wouldn't come back to her, the one that had nagged her while she was cooking. Yet, with determination, she tried to exercise her mind and sat down to write something else. Just then *sejo-bou*, her third sister-in-law, came in. She said, "I see you are not sleeping. Let me sit with you for a while. Where has Shyamoli gone? I saw her quite made up, talcum powder, perfume and all. Her son is asleep. And Ramola and the others are outside."

"She has gone to see a movie."

"I see. That is why you are baby-sitting. She knew we wouldn't have obliged. I feel so sleepy. Let me go and take a nap."

Determined to write, Shailo completed one page when there was a knock at the front door. She knew no one else would go to open the door. So she had to get up. It was *kaki-ma*, Madhu's mother. Shailo invited her inside.

"Here I am. Afternoon is the only time I can visit. So I decided to come to see you. I see you are busy writing a letter, *nau-bou*."

"Not a letter, *kaki-ma* (aunty), something else."

"I heard that you write stories. Madhu was telling me. What do you write about? Why not write one on my life? I have had such a full life. Never heard anyone else experience such a variety of incidents. That should make a long and good story."

"You are right, *kaki-ma*, every life is a story."

"I am not everybody. Nobody could have had a life as rich as mine. Besides, my deity, Radha-Madhav can be a good subject too, for another story. Have you heard *nau-bou*, that Jhinjhotilal's wife poured kerosene on herself to commit suicide? As soon as her mother-in-law saw the flames, she raised a hue and cry and people rushed in to put out the fire and saved her. Jhinjhotilal is a trader. Being his wife, it was not proper for her to join the chorus of accusations regarding his malpractices. Jhinjhotilal had declared that she couldn't live with him if she did not mend her ways. She took it to heart and tried to kill herself. How absurd! Isn't it your duty to protect your husband's interest? In our time we would acquiesce with whatever our husbands did. After all, to a Hindu wife her husband is God!"

Meanwhile, Shyamoli's son had got up and had walked to the rabbits'

enclosure. Hearing crows cawing on the mango tree he toddled towards it and fell down. Immediately, he started bawling. Shailo jumped up, ran to the child and picked him up. Madhu's mother had by now moved to the eldest sister-in-law, *bodo-bou's* room. By now the maid had also come and was busy in the kitchen. Shailo offered some biscuits to the boy and cuddled to calm him. She heard her other sister-in-law *mejo-bou* calling her. "Shailo, could you make some tea, please?"

All others were holed up in their rooms. The maid would also have a cup. At four, all would demand tea. She did not like the idea of mass tea, though. Suddenly she saw Anju. "How nice to see you, Anju. What is it you are holding in your hand?"

"Wool. *mejo-kaki*(second aunty) came to *nau-kaki*(new aunty) for help to get the pattern right. On my way, I saw *nau-kaki's* friend Ila auntie coming."

"Do sit down, my child. Here, Ila also has come."

*Nau-bou* came and said, "Now, do not serve Anju and Ila tea only. Serve them some snacks also. Do give me some too. Listen, the two boys will soon return from college. Make some for them as well. When tea and snacks are ready, send these to my room. Let me go and finish the novel. Purba says, it has to be returned to the library today."

The almost blind mother-in-law called from upstairs, "Oh my daughters'-in-law, it is almost dusk. Please do up the *puja* room. You will all get busy when my sons return. Let the God's room be tidied up before that."

*Mejo-bou* said, "The lady wants Shailo. Better serve tea and snacks quickly and then go upstairs. I have

no time; I have to finish the book I began reading this morning. *Sejo-bou* is not going to open her door till her husband returns. God knows what she does behind the closed doors! *Bad-di* will get a headache if she is woken up now. I can see that *chhoto-bou* is not at home; for you have her son in your lap. My God, Shyam's mother, how is it that you have come so early? Are you starting with the flour right now? You will make us eat cold dinner!"

Shyam's mother replied, "I will go to listen to a discourse on Bhagwat in the evening. Now come, *mejo-bou*, you prepare *chapatis* and *puris* and I will fry them. I am preparing the



dough. I will cut the vegetable too. In any case, it is your turn today."

*Mejo-bou* flared up. "Tell me Shyam's mother, will I not get a stiff back if I make *chapatis* and *puris* for twenty people? Besides I have to return the book. And I am yet to take a bath and do my hair. I suggest, *nau-bou*, engage the boy with a lump of dough and start on the *chapatis* and *puris*, please. After all, not many are to be made. And making *puris* is so easy. Press a ball of dough and you get a *puri*. Let me rather attend to the *puja* room."

Shailo cast a sad glance at her room and moved towards the kitchen carrying the boy. Shyam's mother was

talking non-stop. Shailo fed the boy and then sat down to prepare *chapatis*. Her mind was in turmoil. She was feeling so helpless. At the same time she was amused at the strange ways of a joint family.

Her husband came from work, handed his brief case over to Shailo and said, "Please prepare a first class cup of tea, which only you can. I have a lot to discuss with you. Please finish your chores quickly and come to me. Meanwhile, I will take a bath."

Shyamoli returned, picked up her son and commented, "My God, what is this *nau-di*? The boy is a mess! He is still in the clothes he wore in the morning! And *atta* all over his hands! I left him in your care and what good care you have taken of him!"

Shailo's husband took the teacup from her and held her by the hand.

"Don't be shy, please sit by me just for a while?" he said, "You spend all day in family affairs. Why not spend some time with me?" He took a sip and continued, "Let us go out. I see you haven't had a bath. Hurry, my darling, get ready quickly. Meanwhile, I will also get ready."

Shailo cast a long glance at her husband. She was also keen to have some fresh air. "Okay, I will get ready", she said.

They ran into Babloo, from the next lane as soon as they emerged from their street and hit the main road. He said, "*Bau-di*, what happened to the article you had promised for our magazine? Shall I collect it tomorrow morning?"

"No, not tomorrow, I will need more time."

"Okay, take a week, but not more. Any further delay and it will miss the next issue. Please have it ready in seven days."

Shailo nodded and moved on. Her husband remarked, “You have many admirers. I am the only deprived one!”

Shailo said nothing, only smiled. Back home, her husband said, “Shailo, I heard that *mejo-bou-di*’s brother is coming for a few days. Why not get your sister over so that the two can meet? He will make a good groom.”

“Good idea. I will get Leela over here tomorrow.”

At ten in the night, after dinner, her husband, half reclining in bed lit a cigarette and said, “There is another piece of good news. I have got arrears for the raise I got five months back. Shall I put the money in the bank or do you want to do anything else with it?”

Shailo said, “Put it in the bank. I will ask for it when I need it. At the moment I only want some note books and a pen.”



A little later, Shailo noticed her husband going to sleep clutching the side pillow. She put the table lamp on, carefully turned the shade to block his side and opened her notebook. She caressed the opened page dreamily and tried to give words to the thought that had come to her mind in the morning. She succeeded fairly well in recapturing the ideas that had come surging to her in the morning. Just as she started putting them on

paper, her husband’s annoyed voice broke the spell, “I seek your company at night and you want to deny me that! You had all day for your work. What now? Put off the light!”

Shailo sighed softly. Another wasted day like the many others, she thought. She switched off the light.

□

*Durga Devi (4-11-1920 to June 2000) had barely studied upto primary school but grew up to be a prolific writer in Bengali all through self-education. She published numerous short stories and essays in her lifetime. Her book “Putur Panchali”, won her the best woman writer award for children. A collection of her autobiographical essays, are soon to be published in Bengali.*

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