

GARGI* ... One of Many

“OFTEN when people try to sum up the activity of a group of an individual and can point to no immediate tangible results, they conclude that the activity was a failure. But how can you count all the circles made by a stone when you throw it into the water?”

... I am sending you my diary which I have never shown to anyone but which I feel you at **Manushi** will understand. When I started writing it a few months ago, I for the first time realized my worth, my freedom. I realized that I remained single by choice rather than by chance, that I refused marriage mainly because of my buried rebellious nature – I wanted to retain my independence at any cost...

... I was very bright as a child. I was the pet of my teachers and my parents. In SSC I stood first in the school. I then joined a prestigious college. My classmates, boys and girls, looked down on me as that *Behanji* with a long plait, a long dress, chappals, and a reputation for being very bright. I wanted to be accepted by them so I began to study less. I spent more time reading Perry Mason. I wore high heels and tight-fitting dresses. Still I managed to get good marks and joined medical college. My parents were very pleased. But slowly, I realized that my parents' encouragement was hollow. They only wanted to see me securely married.

From childhood, I had always respected single women like some of my teachers and some women ministers in the State. I too wanted to have a career. Everyone gets married. What is new in that? I wanted to be something more than just a wife and mother. But the letters from home were not encouraging. I was

*These are extracts from her diary and her letters. Gargi is her fictitious name.

constantly nagged : “Do you have anyone in mind ? What about Praveen ? He is from our caste. So what if he is not as intelligent as you are? Why can you not be more friendly with boys?” I became very confused: “Had I come to college to study or to hook a boy ?” My conservative upbringing inhibited me from talking to boys. And I could never flutter my eyelashes and act coy. It seemed like prostituting myself. I knew I was beautiful – at least as beautiful as many of the so-called smart girls. But I always wondered what it was that made the boys go to these smart girls. It always boiled down to the fact that it was the flirtatious, coy, “feminine” behaviour of these girls. But were these girls ever accepted by the men when it came to marriage? No, they were rejected. The puritanical ones were rejected too. The ones accepted were the in-betweens – those who did not equate themselves with men in their work or professional life, those who were prepared to accept security at the cost of liberty...

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When the pressure to get married began building up, I ran away to the US to study further... There too I saw that men did not prefer women who were their equals. They wanted dolls who would dress up, cook, keep house and produce children... Here I was also made more conscious of my single status and of the fact that I did not have a boy friend... I felt very lonely and isolated...

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...When I was 28 it seemed that the chances of my meeting men of my liking were few. I succumbed to parental pressure and got engaged to a boy I hardly knew. I insisted on a long engagement.

... Sachin used to come to visit me.



-Jolly

Whenever we went out, he expected me to pay. One day he asked, “Aren't there any pubs where I can get beer?” I remarked that I was not aware of any and that I would not like him to drink, especially not with my money. He was amazed that even though I had studied abroad, I was so “narrow minded”!

Slowly I realized that this man was extremely jealous. He threw temper tantrums if I came late from the hospital. He would taunt me : “What kept you so late ? Don't give me the usual sob-stories of doctor saving the life of a dying patient ! I know that all lady doctors flirt with their colleagues!” In the next breath he would say : “Why can't you do something about your pimples?” I felt like crying, I seethed with anger. For him, I was just a commodity – he wanted the golden eggs but not the pimples !

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... And yet I wanted to make a go of it... We decided to go to the US after marriage so that I could work and support Sachin while he studied... Discussing this with him, I remarked that he would have to help with the housework. He replied : “You want me to study or waste my energy in housework?”

I stopped arguing and told myself : “Maybe I am making a mountain out of a molehill.”...

For the first time I visited my would be in-laws' house. They asked me to make tea. Astounded, I went to the kitchen and fiddled around with the tins there. I overheard Sachin's sister telling her mother: "You have worked hard all your life. Now *Bhabhi* is coming. She must take charge of the kitchen. We must make it clear to her that her place is in the kitchen. She may be a doctor in the hospital but once she comes home she is a daughter-in-law."

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... Things are going too fast for my liking. A few days before marriage, Sachin told me : "Look here, my father may be educated and forward-looking but my Ma is an orthodox woman. She expects you to bring a dowry." I urged him to explain to his mother that this was a question of principle. I would be bringing in a regular income, would I not? But he was adamant. This was the height of humiliation.. He was not marrying me, but my money, my status...

I was angry, revolted. Whenever I looked at him, I felt nauseated. I asked myself: "Is not a prostitute better off than you are? She sells her body as and when she wants to. She has variety too. What are you going to get from marriage? You will be raped by your husband every day and in return you will pay him! Is this what you have struggled for all your life? Once you are married off, your father will wash his hands of you. If your so-called husband beats you, whom will you turn to?" These thoughts haunted me. One day I read a story about a girl who runs away at the moment of the marriage ceremony. I said : "This is it! That is how I feel!" I broke the engagement...

There was a lot of talk in the town... I never retaliated. I did not refute their stories. I cared too little what they said.

Dear M, (a woman's name) will I always require someone to talk to – someone as abstract as M whom I have never met, whom I never even feel like visualizing ? Are you a symbol just as even though one knows there is no God, one sometimes feels like calling out to him? (why not her?) Or is it because you inspire me to talk? Yes, I think it is this...

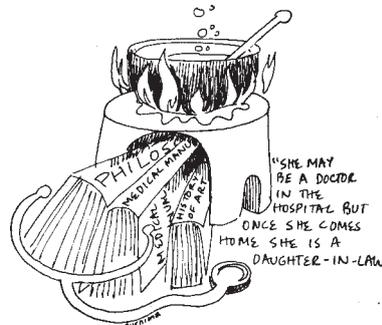
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...I was brought up in a puritanical society. I have never kissed a man except for my ex-fiance. What was it like ? An experiment, an experience. I liked it. But when I came to know him as a person, I detested even his touch. Was this the main reason for my breaking the engagement? I don't know... I used contraceptive pills in those days for fear of rape. He never pushed me into physical relations but I was not quite sure if I wanted to marry him so I did not want to get "involved". I did not want anything to happen which would permanently bind me to him.

... Germaine Greer says : "The struggle which is not joyous is the wrong struggle." I disagree. My struggle was very painful but out of those labour pains has come free bird. I wanted to fly high...

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... My father is proud of me : "My daughter is a doctor, not an ordinary woman..." Sometimes his vociferous praise irritates me. Is he trying to prove that my being unmarried is all right



The fuel that feeds the fire of domestic harmony!

because I am a doctor ? What if I had been uneducated and unmarried ? Would he have treated me as he treated my mother?... "If I was a cook in someone else's house, I would at least get Rs. 100 a month." I remember my mother saying that in the last few encounters I had with her... I could not do anything for her because during those last days she wanted to be near her *Nath* (lord) for better or worse. If she had been with me,

would I have been able to fill the emotional void she felt? I wonder...

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The letter from **Manushi** is like a vitamin tonic. For the last week I was restless because I had not heard from you. This morning when the postman brought the parcel of copies of **Manushi**, you should have seen the light in my eyes... the parcel was torn and tied with string but it was too precious to me... like a glutton, I read your letter and was so glad that we all sisters were bound together like the five fingers of a clenched fist, ever ready to aim the blow when need be...

Already, my neighbours and colleagues are saying that I am crazy to get involved with a women's magazine...

... About 70 of us women went on a two-mile-long *morcha* to protest against the rape and murder of an industrial worker. At the factory gate, we were joined by 200 trade union men who, without walking for even five minutes, just took over the initiative. Our woman's organization banner got lost in the confusion. It was so depressing. The long walk had made us tired, our faces red, and they grew redder with anger seeing the men just taking over. No one knew what was happening. In disappointment and disgust, people slowly dispersed. I was seething with anger because I had taken casual leave for this women's organization *morcha* and not for some trade union meeting. Have you ever experienced this kind of take-over? The worst thing is they were all men. One would not have minded much if they were women.

...Until a few months ago, I used to be very secretive about my life. Now I am not. I feel that my life is an open secret, a constant struggle. It is perhaps more difficult if you are married because then the kids unconsciously blackmail you into accepting the status quo. Other women used to tell me : "You live like a queen, you are happy, you are too independent to be yoked." Slowly, I am beginning to realize what they meant.

... My attitude to life used to be negative. I hated going to weddings

WITH NO IMMEDIATE CAUSE

because of the colossal waste of money in the midst of dire poverty but I always thought that if I did not go, people would say : "She is not married so she is jealous of others' happiness." So I used to go. But last week, I did not go. I sent a greeting card and a letter explaining that I have decided as a principle never to attend any marriage where more than 20 people gather for a feast, where the expenses are not shared by both parties and where dowry is given in any form or shape. I hope a day will come when I will not even be required to write letters of explanation but I want to keep in touch with my friends, relatives, have their confidence and make them understand my actions. Even when I wanted to do a simple thing like keeping a dog for protection, I had negative feelings. People would say : "Well, she has nobody so she keeps a dog!" but when I heard of my friend being molested about four weeks ago, I bought a bitch (a bitch is good because she is a fighter!!).

... We must create our own jokes. When I get angry with a man, I don't call him Son of a Bitch. I call him (not aloud – am not yet liberated, so say it in my mind) SOD which stands for Son of a Dog. Sod also stands for – you know what ! they don't deserve to be called SOB because a bitch is a fighter whereas men are cowards...

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... Sometimes I am dissatisfied with a science career because there are too many women whose sensitivity has been killed and unfortunately all women are born poets, hence the clash. I used to write poetry in school but with deschooling in the colleges, it all dried up. Now at least I can write what I feel and am surprised that other people want to hear me.

Now I know other women who think like myself, I have found a place to focus my thoughts. I am proud of all of you, proud to know there are courageous women still existing in India. We sisters must keep helping each other. □

every 3 minutes a woman is
beaten
every five minutes a
women is raped/every ten minutes
a lil girl is molested

yet i rode the subway today
i sat next to an old man who
may have beaten his old wife
3 minutes ago or 3 days/30 years
ago

he might have sodomized his
daughter but i sat there
cuz the young men on the train
might beat some young women
later in the day or tomorrow
i might not shut my door fast
enuf push hard enuf

every 3 minutes it happens
some woman's innocence
rushes to her checks
pours from her mouth
like the betsy wetsy dolls have been
torn

apart their mouth
menses red and split/every
three minutes a shoulder
is jammed through the rib case/
hot water or
boiling sperm decorate her body

i rode the subway today
& bought a paper from a man
who might
have held his old lady onto
a hot pressing iron/i don't know
maybe he catches lil girls in the
park & rips open their behinds
with steel rods/i couldn't decide
what he might have done i only
know every 3 minutes
every 5 minutes every 10 minutes

i bought her paper
looking for the announcement
there has to be an announcement
of the women's bodies found
yesterday the missing little girl
I sat in a restaurant with my
paper looking for the announcement
a young man served me coffee
i wondered did he pour the boiling
coffee on the woman cuz she was stupid

did he put the infant girl in
the coffee pot cuz she cried too much
what exactly did he do with hot coffee
i looked for the announcement
the discovery of the dismembered
woman's body the
victims have not all been
identified today they are
naked and dead/some refuse to
testify/one girl out of 10's not
coherent i took the coffee
& spit it up i found an announcement
not the woman's bloated body
in the river floating
not the child bleeding in the
59th street corridor/not the baby
broken on the floor

"there is some concern that
alleged battered women
might start to murder their
husbands and lovers with no
immediate cause"

i spit up i vomit i am screaming
we all have immediate cause
every 3 minutes
every 5 minutes
every 10 minutes
every day
women's bodies are found
in alleys and bedrooms/
at the top of the stairs
before i ride the subway/
buy a paper or drink
coffee from your hands i must know
have you hurt a woman today
did you beat a woman today
throw a child across a room
are the lil girl's pants
in your pocket
did you hurt a woman today
i have to ask these obscene questions
i must know you see

the authorities require us to establish
immediate cause
every three minutes
every five minutes
every ten minutes
every day

- Ntozake Shange