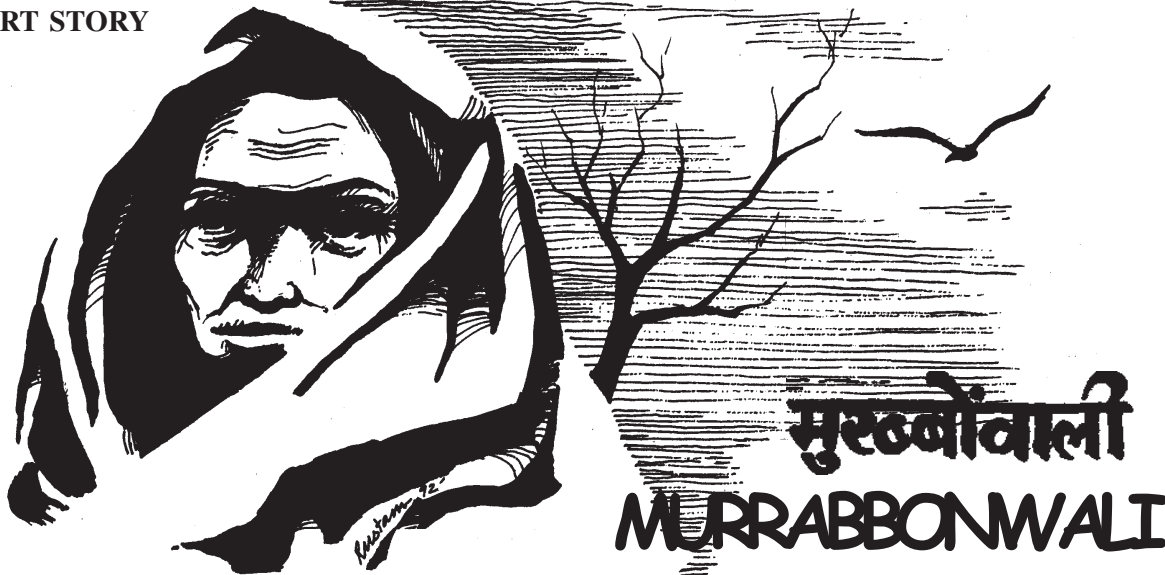


SHORT STORY



by Amrita Pritam

The day the sweet young girl stepped out of her doli the whole village started calling her 'Murrabonwali'.

Only in the land records was her name written as Sardarni Rajkaur, and her father-in-law, as long as he was alive, used to address her as Sardarni Rajkaur. But as far as the community and the other villagers were concerned, she was 'Murrabonwali'. Her rich father had given one 'murraba' in her dowry, but even though no formal will was drawn up, everyone knew she was the heir to his other three 'murrabas' of land as well. It was said of her that when she was a newborn baby and her mother wrapped her in velvet and took her for the first time to the Gurudwara to be blessed, her father had made an offering of eleven gold coins on her behalf. That was the day the priest called her "Murrabonwali" and gave her a veil of real gold thread with the blessings of the Guru.

She was born in a well-to-do family and married into a well-to-do family. But she was forced to live with a sorrow which she alone and her God knew. The newly wed bride had come to know that her husband Hakim Singh was having an affair with the wife of a distant cousin. She learnt that as long as this

cousin Karam Singh was alive, the affair was a secret, but when he died it came out that Karam Singh's widow had aborted two children begotten by Murrabonwali's husband.

All through, the godfearing Murrabonwali never uttered a word. Only once, in the Gurudwara, did she cry out before her god: "Oh knower of this world and of the next! I gave him a pure body, but this corrupt man has corrupted even that!"

And on the morning after those nights when her husband came to her bed, she would thoroughly scrub her body and have the bedding washed. On ordinary days she would recite five shlokas from the jappi, but on these days she would recite the entire *sukhmani*, before touching any food.

Knowingly she had swallowed this poison but she never said a word about it to her husband. Deep down, he, too, was perhaps afraid of her and had never raised his eyes before this wife of his. But even this aspect of his personality she found repulsive like an open ulcer and it filled her with revulsion.

But her mind found rest when

god blessed her with two sons. She felt god had given two arms of steel to this lonely, helpless woman. Her third and last child was a daughter, whom she lovingly called 'Malki'. Even though a different name was later chosen from the *Guru Granth*, the name that had come to her mouth on the day of the baby's birth was the name by which everyone called her.

Time passed peacefully. But when doll-like Malki blossomed into a young woman and passed out of school, time took such a turn that everyone in the community, even those who had never dared raise their eyes in the presence of Murrabonwali, started gossiping.

Malki had insisted that after passing out of school she would go to the city to study. It was accepted that Malki's mind had been influenced by the young schoolmaster who had given her odd books to read, but the matter didn't rest there. People started linking Malki and the master romantically.

One day when Rajkaur was going down a village lane, she heard the voice of Namo, a village woman, who, clearly, was speaking for her benefit: "Listen, I made some mango pickle,

excellent yellow pickle, and I thought I would take some pieces to the master, but that snob said 'I don't eat pickle!' Of course, why should he eat pickles—that is for poor people to eat... He is going to break a jar, he'll eat murrabba....!"

Even though the reference was to edible murrabba, Rajkaur understood that the real reference was to the murrabbas of land she had inherited. She had to swallow the insult but shutting the doors of your ears against the winds of gossip does not help. One day one of the village women asked very rudely: "How is your daughter? She said she was not feeling well, she has pain in her feet..." And when Rajkaur did not reply she added, "Must have gone to the school.... she will get her body fomented!"

That day Sardarni Rajkaur's heart became as hard as a lentil grain so that even the sight of the sobbing Malki could not soften it. And once she gave her consent, Malki was engaged to the boy her father had chosen for her.

It was a few days before her marriage that Malki, shaking like a peepal leaf, took her mother inside the house and confided to her that the man to whom she had given her heart was the school teacher and she could never think of any other man. But Rajkaur put her hand on Malki's head and pleaded for her honour, as if Malki was like a bull who had to lift the whole world on his horns and as if even the slightest movement on her part would shake the whole earth.

And Malki, like the mythical bull, lifted the whole earth on her head. The honour of the family was saved. She closed her eyes and sat in the doli, thus shutting the mouth of the entire community.

And time began passing again. It was a different matter that Malki kept smouldering like a coal fire whose smoke reached the doors of her parent's house and made her mother's

eye smart. Yet, on this fire food continued to be cooked, milk to be boiled, and sons and daughters to be born....

But twenty five years later... time which was passing so peacefully took such a turn that swords were drawn both in Malki's parents, and in her in-laws' houses. Malki's eldest daughter Sahibkaur, who was lovingly called Sahiba by everyone, returned home after six years of college study in the city and announced to her parents that she would marry the man of her choice. And it was discovered that the man of her choice was the son of low caste Mazhabis. He had studied in college with her and was now planning to go to some foreign country for further studies...

Sahiba's brothers were small boys but her father and uncle were still like rods of steel and her maternal uncles could tear up the ground with their heels—so destruction threatened.

They couldn't kill their daughter with their own hands, but the son of Mazhabis could be done away with. So, they started thinking on these lines. They tried reasoning with the girl, but like a live wire she would not allow any one to touch her. In fact, she raised another problem—like a flash of lightning she said that if they dare lay a finger on that man, she would stand as a witness in court against her family.

Malki begged and pleaded with Sahiba but in vain. Realising that all their efforts were in vain, Sahiba's father summoned the help of Sardarni Murrabonwali as a last resort—begging her to come and talk sense into the girl's head, for if a daughter of Jats married into a Mazhabi family it was ultimately her name that would be stained.

Sardarni Rajkaur came in a palanquin with her sons on horseback. The sparks from the horse's hooves lit up Sahiba's father's eyes. He was sure that his daughter who was riding a wild horse through the air would be tamed

by Murrabonwali. Rajkaur came even though she was still slender bodied, she filled the courtyard like a banyan tree when she sat down with the girl at her knees.

Malki was convinced that now her mother would place her hand on the girl's head and say something that would make the girl quietly lift the whole earth on her head as the bull had done on his horns..... In the courtyard nearby Sahiba's father, brothers and maternal uncles were sitting on cots. Sitting at her grandmother's feet Sahiba was speaking out her heart.

Rajkaur kept listening to the girl gravely for a long time. She did not even make a sound to show that she was listening but would sometimes look intently at the girl's face, and all the others were looking at Rajkaur's face.

And then, putting her hand on her granddaughter's head, she said: "Listen, daughter! If your heart is set on this, then do as your heart tells you to do! Otherwise all your life long a fire of coals will keep smouldering inside you."

"Mother!" Malki said in a trembling voice, and, turning yellow as a mustard flower, she looked first at her husband and then at her brothers. "You stop worrying," Rajkaur said like a flash of lightning. "Do you think these sons born of me and these sons-in-law of mine can dare defy me?"

And taking Sahiba by the arm, she said, "Get up, go tell this man who is connected with you to come with his marriage procession. I will not leave till I complete all the rituals of your marriage with my own hands." And then, looking beyond the walls, she said: "Why worry about what people say—they will talk for a few days and it will die down just like a fire of straws."

And time took a startled turn and stared at the face of Murrabonwali. □

Translated from Hindi by Aditya