

"To Goddess
of
Revenge"
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Cast Me Out If You Will

Stories and Memoir



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The Goddess of Revenge

PRATICARADEVATHA

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IT WAS NEARLY midnight. I was sitting alone in the room where I usually did all my writing. The compassionate Goddess of Sleep stood by me, waiting to enfold in her caress the wounds that my spirit had accumulated in the course of the day's hard work. But I knew that if I threw down the pen and paper I had taken up to write my story, I would not be able to touch them again till the same time tomorrow, when the usual obstacles would again present themselves. I sat there wrapped in thought. Silence lay deep around me, interrupted now and then by the sounds of two rats engaged in love talk in the attic above, or the snores of the children sleeping in the next room. The light from the lamp on the table crept out through the window and cast fearful shadows onto the thick darkness outside. The hooting of the many owl families that were my neighbors sounded like a warning in my ears. I must confess: I am a coward by nature. Especially at this deceptive hour of the night.

I closed and bolted the window and raised the wick of the lamp. I checked whether any of the children were awake or whimpering, then came back to my usual place. I had to finish writing today, come what may, but what was I going to write about? How was I to begin? Now that I had sat down to write, all the attendant problems rose up to confront me. Writing stories is not a pleasant task,

especially for a woman like me, for whom status and prestige and a sense of being highborn are all-important. When fictional characters come to life and argue heatedly about contemporary issues, the author has to face opposition from many quarters. If an opponent were to use the weapon of obscene language against me, would I be able to defend myself with a like weapon? And then, the subject of caste distinctions was taboo, and religious controversies were to be avoided at all costs. Indeed, we have arrived at a point when writers have perforce to consider well in advance which particular literary theorist's recriminations they would have to face. It was all very distressing. I suddenly wanted to give it all up.

Filled with an obscure sense of anger, I threw my pen onto the table, and closed my eyes. Innumerable characters passed through my mind as I sat there: people I had seen and not seen, people who were alive and who were dead. Women and men. Creatures tormented by pain, those who had lost their voices, though their throbbing hearts thudded like thunderclouds, flashed like lightning. Were they demanding to be transcribed? I was afraid, but also inspired. Suddenly, I heard the sound of footsteps coming toward me from the next room.

What could it mean? I sat up, startled. I had closed the door, bolted it securely, and locked it. And I had not even heard it being pushed open. It was midnight. Although I did not believe in ghosts, I trembled in fear. My head began to spin. My eyes closed tight. The footsteps grew firmer and firmer. Someone came and actually stood next to me, but I could not move.

The seconds ticked by. Did five minutes pass, or a whole hour? I couldn't say. Time stopped for a long while. Then I heard a woman's voice, just in front of me, a firm yet fine and delicately modulated voice. "Are you asleep? Or afraid?" she asked.

I remained very still. I did not have the strength to move, anyway. The voice went on, its sweetness tinged with a shade of mockery, "When I heard that you wrote stories, I did not imagine that you would be such a coward. After all, a good writer usually has to witness so many scenes of agony and terror."

The eagerness to know the identity of this person, who knew so much about me, drove my fear away. I opened my eyes. In front

of me, the figure of a woman took shape from the surrounding texture of a dream. A woman . . . not a young girl. Not bold or proud. Not old either. All I can say is that she seemed a wonderful manifestation of meaning itself. Sorrow, a certain austerity, disgust, disappointment: all struggled to find expression in her face. The sparks of an intense fire burned fearfully in her eyes—I recognized the emotion as from the leaves of some forgotten book from the distant past. She went on in a voice powerful yet tender.

"I've come with a purpose. I know you are looking for a story to write, but are unable to find one. I have a first-class story, which is going to waste for want of someone to use it. If you agree . . . if you can listen to it without being terrified . . ."

I had mustered my courage by now. "It's true that I panicked. But that's because of the time and the circumstances. Please, for heaven's sake, tell me who you are, and how you got here at this time of the night through a locked door."

"Who am I?" She burst out laughing. "So you want to know who I am, do you? Whether I'm a human being, or an evil spirit, a ghost, or a witch. What superb courage!"

She laughed out loud again, sounding like a forest stream that breaks its banks and overflows. Her laughter thudded against the walls of the room. But this time I did not wince.

"I confess that I am a coward," I said. "But how can I have anything to do with you unless I know who you are? Human beings come to know the very stars in the sky by giving them names and positions of their own."

"Human beings? For heaven's sake, don't count me among them, Sister," she interrupted, looking displeased. "There was a time when I loved to be known as a human being, when I expended my greatest efforts on staying as one. But I have learned—and taught others—that I never want to be called a human being again, and particularly not a woman. To be human, how deceitful it is, how cruel, what an experience of agony."

"Maybe you are right," I admitted. "But pain and agony are gifts that are granted only to human beings. They are links in a divine chain of gold."

She shook her head and prevented me from going on. "Stop this

foolish raving: 'divine,' 'gold.' What melodious descriptions! A 'chain of gold' indeed. Let me ask you, what advantage do golden chains have over iron ones if they are meant to be fetters? Only this: that iron shows its true colors. And gold? What a glitter. A mere coating. God! What does it prove but the difference between a human being and a demon?"

Her face, which was full of hatred for her fellow beings, seemed transformed into something nonhuman. I could not be certain whether her expression signified sorrow, hatred, pride, or revenge, but I found it a singularly attractive mixture of all these emotions, and my eyes were riveted on her. What deep despair, what grief this life must have borne!

"So you're waiting to hear my story," she continued, after a short silence. "All right, I've come for that anyway. It is an old story. It happened more than fifty years ago, and it is a true story, one that shook the world to its foundations when it happened. You had not been born then, neither had your social organizations, with their penchant for debate, nor their leaders. And yet the turmoil that this story created over a great part of Kerala still continues. Some of the characters who figured in it may still be alive. Have you heard of Tatri?"

Oh, oh, so this was she. I drew back sharply in fear. This was the woman whose name our mothers had forbidden us even to utter, the very memory of whose name awakened horror. This was—oh, what could I say?

She smiled with evident delight at my distress. "Yes, yes, you're thinking, which namboodiri woman has not heard of that unfortunate creature, aren't you? No one says so in so many words. But everyone knows. But, look, child! Do you know for whom, for what that ill-fated sadhanam¹ sacrificed her life? She too was a pure and untainted young woman once, like all of you. She wove chains of sacred karuka grass. She recited her prayers with a holy thread in her hands. She performed all the ritual fasts. She was as meek as a doll; after the age of ten she never looked at a man's face, or spoke to him. Grandmothers advised young girls who had reached puberty to learn from Tatri's shining example. But you and I know that all this is part of an outward show. By the time we are seven-

teen or eighteen, we acquire an amazing capacity to keep our feelings under control. As we sit in the veranda by the light of the new moon, chanting our prayers, we hold the sighs that rise in our hearts in ourselves; no one ever hears them. Singing the "Parvathi Swayamvaram," the "Mangalayathira,"² and other auspicious marriage songs, moving our feet in time to their rhythm, we learn to control the trembling in our throats. Yet, do we not listen to the sound of men's footsteps from the living room? Even while struggling with the prickly exasperating kuvalam flowers, our hearts are full of the fragrance of mango blossoms. And we wait. Not just days and months, but years. Till at last one day our mothers come to us with henna and a silver ring. Whether our hands are placed in those of an old man or a young one, a sick man or a libertine is all a matter of destiny. We can do nothing but endure.

"People told me that I had been singled out for a very special destiny. I was his first wife. And he was not an old man either. He had enough to live on at home. So I started married life with a boundless sense of happiness. He was a passionate man. I nurtured my desires to suit his. I did my utmost to satisfy him in bed, with the same attention with which I prepared food to please his palate. After all, a husband is considered to be a god. It was to give pleasure to this god that I learned a harlot's ways, those talents that were to become so notorious later. It was he who taught them to me. If it had been otherwise, my sister! If I too had become a meek wife, ignored by her husband, like countless women in our society, I wonder whether this cursed happening would have been blown so much out of proportion. I don't know. Maybe the intoxication of physical pleasure crept insidiously into my mind and lingered there as a fragrance. But he was the only person enclosed within that fragrance, I swear it. That is why I was so upset when we began to drift apart gradually. He began to stay away from home for many nights in succession. Occasionally, it was to perform a religious rite, or to attend a temple festival. He would stay in rich princely homes then. When we met, more and more rarely, I would weep before him, find fault with him. To whom could I unburden my sorrows, except to him?

"He would laugh, indifferent to the pleas of a broken heart. Man

is free. He lives for pleasure. Just because he was married—and to an uninteresting namboodiri woman—it did not mean that he had to waste his youth on her.

"Anger and fury sharpened within me. I wanted to batter myself, I wanted to die. I even cursed myself for having been born. Why had I been born a namboodiri woman? Couldn't I have been born into some other caste in Kerala, some caste that would have given me the right to pay this arrogant man back in his own coin?

"And yet, on his every birthday, I bathed and prayed for a long and happy married life. I offered ghee lamps and garlands of thumba flowers in the temple. All I wanted now was to see him sometimes so that I could fill my eyes with his presence. Just as when I had reached puberty I had begun to pray for a husband, I longed now for my husband's love.

"Thanks to the generosity of our *karyasthan* we did not starve. But emotions and sensations have their own hunger, don't they? Greed. Thirst. Once brought to life, they cannot be quelled. They creep into the bloodstream, into the veins, they melt in them and simmer there. That was what happened to him too. But then, he was a man and I a woman, a woman born into a cursed society.

"Like all *anterjanams*, I too endured, kept my feelings in check, and carried on. It happened, without any warning: one evening, he came home with his new wife. They slept in the very room where I had slept with him. I did not mind serving food to that harlot. But though I had read Shilavathi's³ story a hundred times, making their bed was—Although I was a namboodiri woman, I was a human being too. Maybe I had accused her of being a prostitute. Maybe I had cursed her for being a slut and a harlot. This was the first time I thought of men as monsters, the first time my husband became a murderer in my eyes. I could have borne the torture for myself. But when he, my husband, used the same words—'I brought her home deliberately, knowing she's a harlot. I like harlots. Why don't you become one yourself?'—what a cruel blow that was.

"Even to think of it petrifies me. Imagine a husband telling his chaste, highborn wife, a woman who worships him, 'If you want me to love you, you must become a prostitute.' An irrational, uncontrollable desire for revenge took hold of me. But only for an

instant. My faith stood in the way. 'No, I can't remain here, even for a single day.'

"After that I never spoke to him again. I never spoke to anyone. The days went by somehow, empty of events, empty of love. If only something would move in this hell of darkness! I went back to the house where I was born, my heart full of limitless grief, a burden of sorrow that it could hardly bear. I thought I would find comfort and relief at home, but I was wrong. In truth, are not all namboodiri households a kind of prison? There is little to choose between them. My father was dead, but all his five wives were still alive. My elder brother was looking for a wife to replace his fourth one who had just died. Two of my older sisters, both widowed, were living at home. The third one had gone mad because her namboodiri husband had tortured her, and she wandered about here and there. Two unmarried younger sisters had become a burden on the house, a continual source of worry to their mother. I joined them, going from the frying pan into the fire. Amid such grief, who would not long for whatever comfort society permitted? I was still young. My body bloomed with health. I knew I could afford the arrogance of being certain that I was more beautiful than the prostitutes who kept my husband company. And yet, when I combed my hair, placed the bright red *sinduram* between my eyebrows, and peered out through the barred door, all I felt was a desire to see the world, or, at most, an innocent longing that someone should notice how beautiful I was. There were men who met my eyes, returned my smile. After all, people tend to smile if you smile at them. It soon became a habit. Were not those highborn brahmins susceptible precisely because they knew I was a namboodiri woman? They were aware of the consequences. But as long as nobody was aware of what they did, they indulged in the basest actions.

"Scandalous reports began to spread. And meaningful looks. I heard murmurs. The women's quarters turned into a fifth column. Amma cursed whenever she caught sight of me. 'You sinner, born to ruin the family's honor! Why were you ever born in my womb?'

"My brother's wife said one day, 'Tatri, don't come into the kitchen anymore. I'd rather you didn't touch anything there.'

"I did not understand the nature of the crime for which I was be-

ing punished. I had touched no man except my husband. I had not even dared to think of another man that way. If I peered out of the window, if someone saw me and was attracted to me, how could that be my fault? But the world does not concern itself with such questions. My heart hardened as stones of mockery were hurled at me. My mind whirled with the fear of disgrace. Then suddenly I knew that I could take anything that came to me. I had reached a point where I could bear anything. Darkness surrounded me on all sides. My enemies hissed at me like poisonous serpents in a smoke-filled darkness. They stung me, bit me. To defend myself in this battle unto death, I had to become a poisonous serpent too. The desire for revenge and the hatred that had lain dormant within me blazed high. If I tell you about the decision they forced me to, you will draw back in fear. You will tremble and drive me out of here. Oh, my sister, what I did was as much for your sake as for mine. For the sake of all namboodiri women who endure agonies. So that the world would realize that we too have our pride. I wanted to prove that we have strength and desire and life in us too. I delighted in the sorrow each man had to bear, for not a single tear shed by a namboodiri woman has value. But alas, all of you, for whom I did this, despised me. My very name was uttered with disgust in my lifetime. I was feared more than a demon. Even in the fashionable world of today, Tatri remains despicable; even you look upon me as a fallen and disgraced woman."

Her voice trembled at this point. Her eyes filled. Weighed down by an unbearable sadness, she put her head down on the table. Silently, without moving, I watched that personification of hopelessness. The destiny of a woman like her, placed in such a situation, could take so many directions. If that broken life were to disintegrate completely, if its shattered remnants were to be scattered on the roadside like fragments of broken glass, surely it could not be her fault. Only the base tenets that had made her what she was could be blamed. For a namboodiri woman who feels the heat of emotion, who feels proud to be alive, there is only one of two ways possible: she must go mad, or fall from grace. Both ways are hard.

Maybe she had no tears left to shed. She sat up. A flame that would have burned up even the fires of hell blazed in her eyes.

"No, child! I will not cry anymore. This is my last moment of weakness. I knew I would never be terrified again, not even if the seas swept over me or the skies fell down. Fear ceases to exist when life and death seem no different from each other. I had made my decision. If this was to be my ultimate destiny, I would transform it into an act of revenge. I would avenge my mothers, my sisters, countless women who had been weak and helpless. I laid my life, my soul, everything I possessed, at this sacrificial altar of revenge and sought the blessings of the gods. Let everyone see—and learn—that not only man but also woman could bring herself down to the lowest level. My capacity to err would have to be strong enough: if I were to be cast out of society, if I were to be ostracized, I wanted to make sure that I was not innocent. No one was going to punish me for a crime that I had not committed. If I were going to be pushed aside, others who were mean and cruel were going to fall with me. I wanted people to learn a lesson. If there was true justice, would it not be necessary to cast out more namboodiri men than women?"

"From that night onward, a new face was seen at all the temple festivals, the face of a fascinating courtesan. She was passionate and beautiful. But more than her loveliness, it was a bewitching air of shyness, a gentleness of nature, that attracted men to her. Princes, titled chiefs, and many other well-known men crowded around her. I told them all that I was a married woman and not a prostitute. I told them I had a husband, I told them everything, offering them a chance to break free. The only thing I hid from them was that I was a namboodiri woman. But the answer that they gave never varied: that bondage to a husband was not stipulated in this land of Parasurama,⁴ and that all women, except the namboodiris, were free here. They could do what they liked. This was the pattern of their comforting excuses. Oh, the minds of these men, who pretended to be self-respecting, pure, and saintly, even ascetic. If only men who insisted that their wives remain chaste did not deliberately seduce other men's wives.

"Would not a woman who was aware that so many were attracted to her succumb, finally, in spite of herself? Particularly one condemned to the inner rooms of a namboodiri household, whom

other women spat on and kicked? It was an age when the greed for flesh knew no bounds. The fame of this new harlot spread far and wide. Those who came to her went away gladdened. And she did not forget to persuade them to express their satisfaction through gifts. Thus the reputation of many who swaggered as honorable men of society came into the keeping of this prostitute.

"Only one man was left to come to me. The man I had waited for unceasingly. Surely, he would not fail to come when he heard of this beautiful strong-willed woman, for he loved passionate encounters. It was five years since we had met. Although I recognized him when we met at the trysting place in the temple courtyard, he did not make me out. How could he have? How could anyone have guessed that this proud and confident woman, this jewel among prostitutes, was that humble namboodiri wife of long ago?"

"That was an unforgettable night. It was the night I had lived for, for so long, the night for which I had let myself be degraded. At least I was able to delight him for once. Ever since he had said to me, 'Go and learn to be a prostitute,' his command had lain simmering in my consciousness. If a woman who learns the ways of a prostitute in order to delight her husband can be considered chaste, I was another Shilavathi. I think it was a blissful night for him too. For, a little while before we parted, he said to me, 'I have never been with anyone as intelligent and as beautiful as you. I wish I could always stay with you.'

"He had trapped himself. As he slipped his ring on my finger, I asked, 'Are you certain that you've never met anyone like me?'

"He lifted his sacred thread, held it high in his hand, and swore, 'By this wealth I possess as a brahmin, this symbol of my caste, I have never seen a woman as passionate and as intelligent as you in all my life.'

"A triumphant smile was on my lips. I raised my voice a little and said, 'That's a lie. Remember your wife. Was she not as pleasing as I am?'

"Light dawned on him. Suddenly, he looked at my face and screamed, 'Ayyo, my *Vadakkunnathan!* It is Tatri! Tatri! Tatri!' Then he fled, I do not know where he went or when he stopped.

"The story is nearly over. You know what happened after that.

The affair provoked a smartavicharam⁵ that rocked Kerala to its very foundations. From great prince to highborn brahmin, men trembled, terrified because they did not know whose names this harlot was going to betray. Some men ran away and escaped. Others performed propitiatory rites, praying that she would forget their names during the cross-examination.

"One man's ring with his name engraved on it. Another's gold waist chain. Yet another's gold-bordered *angavastram*. The incriminating pieces of evidence were used to prove the guilt of sixty-five men, including *vaidikans*. I could have caused not just these sixty-five but sixty thousand men to be cast out of the community. And not I alone. In those days, any lovely and intelligent woman who practiced this profession could have brought ruin upon entire families of landlords and wealthy aristocrats. And yet I did not go that far, even though I knew the power of a namboodiri woman's curse. That historic trial had to end there. A longstanding grievance was assuaged. Was it simply an act of revenge performed by a prostitute? Or was it also the expression of the desire for revenge experienced by all namboodiri women who are caught in the meshes of evil customs, who are tortured and made to suffer agonies? Tell me, Sister! Who is more culpable, the man who seduces a woman in order to satisfy his lust, or the woman who transgresses the dictates of society in an attempt to oppose him? Whom would you hate more? Whom would you cast out? Give me an answer at least now, after so many years have gone by."

I had sat dazed, unable to utter a single word, while she recounted this extraordinary story. I was frozen, helpless.

Remarking on my silence, she continued with an air of profound hopelessness, "Perhaps I've made a mistake. Why did I come here today? Why did I try to talk to yet another of those anterjanams who are without shame or self-respect, another slave among slaves? They will never learn to improve their lot. Never." Her voice trembled with anger and grief.

But I felt no anger toward her. I said to her softly, "My poor sister! I am not trying to find fault with you. On the contrary, I have deep sympathy for you. Truly, you are not an individual anymore; you are society itself. You are timidity and weakness weeping before

strength, helpless womanhood screaming for justice, bloodstained humanity whose desires and talents have been ground into dust.

"How can the expression of irremediable hopelessness and helplessness be identified with your own? Consider, there is another side to all this. I have been thinking about it. Fired as you were with the intoxication of revenge, why did you not try to inspire all the other weak and slavish anterjanams? Why did you shoulder the burden of revenge all alone? In such matters, Sister, individuals cannot triumph. On the other hand, they can bring disaster upon themselves. Consider, now, what good did that hurricane you set in motion do to society? Men began to torture anterjanams all the more, using that incident as a weapon. We are close now to bowing our heads once again under the same yoke. Not even the women in the families of the sixty-five who were cast out have been released from their agony."

I too was shaken. I continued, my voice trembling, "So, forgive me, Tatri sacrificed her very soul, but in the eyes of the world her sacrifice is remembered only as a legal affair involving a prostitute—an affair that certainly created a turmoil, but did not succeed in pointing the way to anything positive. The end cannot justify the means, Sister. Even while I recognize your courage and self-respect, I disagree with you. But namboodiri society can never forget Tatri. From the heart of a great silence, you managed to throw out an explosive, a brightly burning spark. It was a brave warning, a cry of victory. In the minds of the generations to come, this cry ignited a torch that still burns high and threatening. In its radiance, all the sins of that *praticaradevatha*, that Goddess of Revenge, are forgiven."

I held out my hands to that woman's form in affection and sympathy. Its face paled. Its eyes grew lifeless. "Oh, I am a sinner. A fallen woman. An evil spirit. Even my shadow must never fall over society."

Continuing to talk, her form faded slowly, dissolving like the morning mist. The crowing of the cock woke me from my dream.